著 みかみてれん
画 竹嶋えく
わたしが恋人になれるわけないじゃん、
ムリムリ!!
(※ムリじゃなかった!?)
WATA-NARE
ダッシュエックス文庫

「わたしも、れな子クンのいちばんになりたいなー♪」
照沢樓子
リュシー・ルフェーベル
「お食事は、ひつようですか？」

両腕をれな子の首に回す。
さらに体を、ぎゅぎゅう♡と密着させる。

「がぶ」

「ひい!?」

鞠子はれな子の首に歯を立てた。
なるほど、こういう味。
加減を調整し、歯形をつけてやる。

「あうあうあうあ

Disclaimer:

This has been translated by AI, so some parts may not be 100% accurate in their exact meaning. However, they still fall within an acceptable range that does not alter the original intent of the sentence.

TL note :
Yeah, this is difficult for me since I'm above N4 level but still not quite at N3, and it's hard to reconstruct and check certain parts to make sure they match the meaning of the original Japanese source.Also, I’m not a native English speaker, but I’m happy to be learning new things, especially since I love both English and Japanese.
This work is based on Tezseret's previous work, Watanare Vol. 6. I used the same font, paragraphing, and spacing. Once again, thanks to him for providing the AI translation from Volume 5 to 6 —Elsfi

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A Tale of Amaori Haruna Part 2

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Epilogue

Chapter 5 : The Exhausting Times Continue!? No Way!

Second year of middle school, autumn.

Renako Amaori's life was dull and lifeless. The girl walked to school with hunched shoulders and took her seat. As if stalling for time before the first class began, she sluggishly prepared for the lesson.

The only thing she liked in this classroom was the music flowing from her earphones. Everything else didn’t matter to her at all.

Every day was the same routine.

I don’t join any clubs, I don’t study seriously, and I’m not enthusiastic about making friends. I only sit at my desk at school because I’m forced to.

Even while chatting about trivial things with my so-called friends—people in class who talk to me—my mind is replaying the game I played last night.

A gray youth. Everything felt half-hearted and lacking motivation—so much so that I wanted to call it that.

Empty days.

I think It was a slow and steady drift toward dropping out.

『Doing my best to enjoy the thrilling moments of now!』 At some point, I started looking at kids like that with a detached gaze. Maybe it was because, from the start, I had already given up on ever being like them. Back then, I didn’t even try to realize that.

Trying too hard felt uncool. If it’s going to exhaust me, it’s better not to bother. After all, the outcome of anything is obvious even before I start.

That was my stance. Pushing myself wouldn’t lead to anything good.

And yet, I was happy.

Even if, from the outside, my life seemed like nothing special, those days still brought me contentment.

Time will one day turn a girl into an adult. It will teach me how to face reality. I’m still in the middle of that process.

An equal moratorium that comes to everyone.

And yet, it shattered.

Nashiji Komachi. That was the name of the invader.

She destroyed Amaori Renako’s sense of normalcy.

She realized that no one had ever truly protected her. The peaceful days she thought she had were a lie. Those who did nothing could achieve nothing. School life crumbled easily under the whims of the strong.

After that, a year and a half was lost. The loss, amounting to one-tenth of the fifteen years the girl had lived, was nearly equivalent to the proportion of the arms in a human body.

After spending such a long, long time wandering in the depths of the sea, the girl finally started swimming again.

With her sister's devoted support and her own determination, she decided she wanted to change—she needed to change.
It was only because of that resolve that she was able to start walking her own path.
She began to like herself, even if just a little.

From here, the story should have been heading straight toward a happy ending.

It should have.

Even if no one understands her, the girl still continues to be afraid.

She fears that the very thing that destroyed her world will destroy everything once again. She repeated that one single phrase in her mind millions, maybe billions of times.

The fear that lived within her heart—that was the true form of the monster.

* * *

I ran away. Right after meeting Minato-san in the park.

I don't remember exactly how or where I ran, but somehow, I had returned home.

The black mold that had grown in my heart was slowly trying to spread over my entire body. It was suffocating. I couldn’t breathe properly.

Nashiji Komachi. There was no mistake about it. She was my classmate from middle school.

She was flashy, strong-willed, and the leader of the girls' group. Back then, she was the boss of the class.

Her facial features were beautiful, I’d say. But whenever I remembered her face, it was always blacked out in my mind.

What came to my mind was only the mouth that criticized people, the eyes filled with anger and hatred, and her words that cut like a knife.

The scars throb.

Raised in a sterile, purely controlled environment, I had never been exposed to "malice" directed at me personally.

The first time I encountered malice, it was so terrifying.

That's why I shut myself away in my shell.

I thought that after debuting in high school and overcoming many things, I had grown... But I was still just like a baby. I hadn't experienced the things that ordinary people naturally go through. I was like a baby crying out of fear for its first injection.

And I still couldn't help being afraid of injections, no matter how long it had been.

It’s really pathetic…

In my dark room with the curtains drawn, as I sank deeper into the swamp of self-loathing, another question appeared in my mind.

The reason for Haruna’s fight.

If Minato-san were the younger sister of Nashiji Komachi, then perhaps...

Once I had thought of it, I couldn’t help but take action.

This is certainly not courage.

I just wanted to release the overwhelming impulse, the feeling that I couldn’t bear inside my heart anymore.

I left my room as if being scolded by something and knocked on Haruna's door. My vision was narrow, and my mind wasn’t working properly. I knew I wasn’t calm.

"Hm?"

Haruna, my younger sister who had continued to skip school, opened the door and showed her face.

Even though I should be able to see what kind of expression my sister has, it wasn’t registering in my head.

"Hey, Haruna."

I spoke with a rusty voice.

"Eh? What? Big Sis, your face is all pale."

"What does that mean?"

"What?"

I couldn’t understand the other person’s words, so the conversation didn’t go anywhere. I just quickly said what I needed to say.

"Did you know? About Nashiji Komachi."

"...Huh?"

"Minato-san is her little sister"

I could see my sister furrowing her brows at my vague statement.

"What are you talking about?"

I pressed closer to Haruna.

"If that's not the case, then it's weird. Haruna would never hit someone."

"Hey..."

"It's my fault, right? It's because of me."

"Calm down!"

"I can't, because–'

"Ugh, forget it"
Haruna raised her hand. Then, she brought it down in a knife-hand strike. On top of my head.

Thud—

"Ugh!"

The impact was so strong that it shook my skull, and stars seemed to fly out from my eyes.

"Calm down."
I instinctively pressed my head and stepped back. I was shaking.
The pain wasn't that bad, but...
What... What the heck...

"H-Haruna... hit someone...!"

"Listen to me!"

"I-I knew it... it's because of me...!"

"That's right! That's your fault, Sis!"

Tears slowly welled up in the corner of my eyes.

"Why... why would you do this for someone like me...?"

"Hey..."

In our mismatched conversation, Haruna groaned like the frustrated sound of a computer fan.

"Since earlier, what are you even saying?!"

Haruna, with her hands on her hips, leaned in closer.

Her steady gaze had an odd sense of intimidation, like a stray cat asserting ownership of its territory.

E-eh...

Suddenly, sweat began to pour out of me. I don’t understand. I don't understand my own actions... I opened my mouth awkwardly.

"U-um... Earlier, I had a conversation with Minato-san..."

In that instant, Haruna's eyes widened.

"Huh!? What are you doing, making decisions on your own!?"

Whoa, scary.

Is this the second time in my life I'm facing "malice"...!?
Covering my head with both hands like a helmet, I asked cautiously.

"B-but... Haruna, you haven’t told me anything..."

"I don’t need to tell you. How many times do I have to say it? I really wish you'd stop."

"B-but!"

To stand up to Haruna, I raised my voice too. A loud sound is power. When a civet threatens, it lets out a much louder cry than usual.

"Haruna, you haven't told me anything! Of course I'm going to be worried!"

"That's unnecessary concern. Besides, I already said I’ll go back to school in two months."

"Two months is a long time! Humboldt penguins are already fully grown and leave the nest after two months!"

"Hey..."

Here comes the "Hey..." again!
I'm scared of my little sister's "Hey..."! It should be banned by treaty!

"Anyway, my being absent from school has nothing to do with you, right?"

"That's what I'm saying! It might have something to do with me!"

"It doesn't. It's impossible."

I look back at Haruna who's crossing her arms, with an upward glance.

"But…"

"Are you stupid? Why would I hit someone for you? Why would I do something like that?"

"That is…"

No matter how much I said, Haruna didn't change her usual pace, and my sense of responsibility gradually faded. I was treated like a small child frightened by the destruction of a world I saw in a dream.

So when asked, "Why did you hit her?", to say the next words...
it required a lot of courage.

"Because... Haruna... likes me..."

The reasoning I revealed, once spoken aloud, sounded like a ridiculous, absurd story. But still, no matter how I thought about it, I couldn't find any other explanation. I had no evidence... but there was no way this was just a coincidence.

I hung my head and waited.
...There was no reaction from Haruna.

I looked up and glanced at her.

Haruna, with her arms crossed, was looking down at me with lifeless eyes.

"You’re an idiot."

Her voice was as cold as the vacuum of space, devoid of even the slightest warmth.

"Nguh…!"
Gasping for air, I struggled to breathe.

"Haa, haa… N-no, but…"

"You're an idiot."

"The chances of the person you hit just happening to be Nashiji Komachi’s little sister, that’s just… impossible, or…"

"You're an idiot."

"Uuuuuuu…"

This is bad. At this rate, Haruna might insult me to death. My life points are already at zero. I'm barely standing, clinging only to my dignity as a big sister.

"Who’s this Nashiji Komachi person, anyway?"

"Th-that’s…"

My mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for air.

"She’s Minato-san’s… older sister…"

"And?"
And… a-and!?

When she pressed me for more, I froze.

What came after that… was the story of my traumatic middle school experience.

I did something small that angered Nashiji Komachi, and the entire class ended up ignoring me. It was the event that led Amaori Renako to stop going to school.

I've never told anyone about it—not the teachers, not my parents. And of course, not my sister.

Is Haruna just pretending not to know? Or does she truly have no idea?

When I knocked on her door earlier, I wasn't thinking straight—I was completely consumed by the need to confront her. But now… my confidence is starting to waver.

Ugh, I don't get it anymore! Why do I have to feel like this?!

"Just be honest already, Haruna! I don't understand! Why won't you talk to me?! I'm your big sister!"

I stomped my feet in frustration as I shouted.

"If you're going through something difficult or painful, can't you let me share some of the burden? We're family, aren't we?!"

I glared intensely at Haruna.

But the moment she met my gaze, Haruna was no longer there.

Click. The door shut behind her.
A voice came from the other side of the door.

"You're an idiot."

I threw myself onto the living room sofa, wearing a blank expression.
Lying face down, I buried my face into the sofa cushion with my arms and legs stretched out.

My heart felt completely empty.

It hurts...

Even after everything I said, Haruna still wouldn’t tell me anything. That fact alone left me in shock. The circumstantial evidence was slowly piling up. It should have been enough.

Yet, when I try to grab her, Haruna wraps herself in needles. The palm of my hand, clutching the porcupine, was covered in blood.

To begin with... Little sister?, big sister?... so what? Why does it even matter...? Maybe I was the fool for meddling with someone who never asked for help...

If I had kept reaching out without giving up, did I think my sister would eventually say, "Sorry, big sis~... everything I did was for you~... "Irritating emoji" ? Hahaha...

How foolish. Ridiculously foolish. Being called "idiot" four times was only to be expected.

To save Haruna from skipping school (though even saying "save" in that context is so condescending, I realize now that I was wrong... hahaha...).

I was offered a helping hand by everyone in the quintet. Ajisai-san, Satsuki-san, Kaho-chan, Mai, everyone worked together, so I thought I could do something too. We even took a bath together, and I thought our hearts had gotten a little closer, but in the end, this is what happened.

With the turn of the blade, my heart was torn to shreds.

Such a pitiful Amaori Renako. For short, 'Awa-Renako.'

Anyway, once I enter university, I’ll be living on my own. Then I’ll just get a job (whether I can or not, I won’t think about that now). I’ll live a life where I hardly ever see my little sister again…

Even though we're family, even though we share blood, it’s just that level of connection… I had been seeing myself in Haruna, who’s skipping school, but Haruna is a different person from me…

Fine, fine. I don’t care anymore. She can do whatever she wants. Being truant is fun. She can play games from morning until night every day, that’s the best, right? Even if she ends up graduating middle school like this, I’m sure Haruna will manage somehow… Haruna is different from me…

Right now, I’m just a disillusioned Amaori Renako. Or, in short, a "disillusioned-Renako ."

My sister probably doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t know about Nashiji Komachi, or that Minato-san is her little sister.

It was all just a series of coincidences. I’ve decided to settle on that.

There must have been another reason for the punch.… Maybe it was because she fought over a boyfriend, or because someone wrote bad things about her on social media… There must be reasons that have nothing to do with my life, things that never intersected with mine…

I didn’t even feel like looking at my phone, so I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

The news, completely unrelated to my life, flowed on.

My thoughts started to melt away.

Ahh... maybe I should just become a truant too~...
I mean, I have tests right after the break, and that’s super annoying...

Human relationships are just full of troublesome things, and honestly, I can’t be bothered~...

Ugh... I’m so tired... so tired, tired, tired...

"...Queen Rose's exclusive model..."
...Huh?

At that moment, a familiar face appeared on the TV. Someone who had at least some, no, a lot of connection to my life.

Oozuka Mai.

With long blonde hair, fair skin. Always wearing a gentle smile, the epitome of a perfect beauty. The young lady of the famous brand Queen Rose, who had everything she could ever want as a first-year high school student, and... my... well, she’s my... girlfriend...

No, no! What do you mean, girlfriend?! That has nothing to do with me!

"Am I so bad at even being miserable!? This is..."

No, wait. That's not it. There's a personality in my heart like a jackknife, waiting to break out. Yes, that's it! Right!? My middle school self!

Just for now, I can vent as much poison as I want at Mai. Go ahead! Have more if you want!

My middle school self rises before me like a phantom. That's right, now! Go for it! Stand beside me! My Stand! “A past that will never disappear”! School–Refuser!

My Stand looks down at me, opening its mouth.

"What is this person saying? What an idiot."

.....

She always uses so many words to insult people…

But only at times like this, she stabs me right in the heart with the shortest line…

That's right, the one she hates the most isn’t anyone else, but the foolish me. I hate you too…

I’ve even been betrayed by the voice inside me, and now I don’t feel like doing anything. I lie down on the sofa, sprawled out on my back.

What the hell, seriously. I can't deal with this anymore.

I wonder if five trillion yen will fall from the sky right now! Or maybe, if Haruna suddenly changes her mind and says, "I'm so sorry, big sister! Actually, everything I did was for you!~ Bieeeen!~" and comes running to me crying...

Then, all my complaints would disappear, and I could go on a lovey-dovey date with Mai and Ajisai...

...What a pointless fantasy...

Right after.

Someone rushed into the living room with heavy footsteps.
It was Haruna, her face pale with urgency.

"Oh, B-Big sister!"

Huh, wait…?
I instinctively sat up.

Could it be, Haruna...!?

The girl who had just called me "idiot" four times earlier was now kneeling in front of me, flustered and blushing, holding her phone in one hand.

"W-What is it?"

"T-that, that that!"

Oh no. My heart's starting to race.

"Y-Yeah?"

Is she going to say it? Could it be...?
Has she had a change of heart...? Did my feelings reach her...!?

Haruna shoved her phone at me.
"Did you see it!? This!"

On the screen was a large photo of Mai.

That's totally different! I knew it, but still! I got my hopes up and then got disappointed... What kind of fool am I? Maybe I should try taking the Clown Certification Level 5 or something.

"I haven't seen it..."

Now that I think about it, I think I saw Mai on the news earlier. Haruna, with her eyes wide open, shoved the phone towards me.

"Read! The article! Hurry!"

"Y-yeah."

Under pressure, I skimmed through it. It said the following:
"Oozuka Mai, sudden engagement announcement--"
Oozuka Mai, the representative model for Queen Rose Co., Ltd., has announced her engagement. Oozuka said, "To all the fans who have always warmly supported me, to all the people who have been supportive and taken care of me, I would like to make an important announcement. I apologize for the sudden news and for making it personal, but I am pleased to inform you that I have gotten engaged to a woman I have been in a relationship with for some time."

"Eh!?"
No way... Huh...!?

W-Wait, Mai!?

This can't be true, right!?

What are you doing, acting on your own!? If this happens... I won't be able to attend school properly starting tomorrow...!

A scene appears in my mind.

Surrounded by a group of reporters. Microphones shoved in my face. Strobes flashing incessantly, with people demanding comments, and I'm being showered with envious gazes from all around. And then, I find myself jumping into the world of celebrities...

"Big sis! Look, here! Look!"

"Huh?"

My sister, shaking my shoulders, points further down the article.

"'The partner is a famous model of French nationality.'"

I look back at her and shout.

"I was a famous model with French nationality!?"

In response, my sister...

ニュース｜芸能
王塚真唯、
突然の婚約発表

"……You were having quite the dream, weren't you, Big Sis?"

"Huh!?"

She looked at me with a gaze of pity, as if consoling a friend who had just been dumped.

……Whaaat!?!?

***

The next day, at school.

When I arrived, there was already a crowd gathered at the school gate.

It wasn't just Ashigaya High School students. There were also plenty of adults with cameras... probably members of the press? Everyone must be waiting for Oozuka Mai to arrive.

Of course, I am not a famous model with French citizenship. Although I tried to search my memory thinking, "Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance...?" it didn’t seem like I could fully deceive myself.

I sent a message to Mai to ask about the situation, but she didn’t reply. So, I thought I’d just ask her directly... but this seemed like it was going to be a huge hassle.

As I waited a little ways off, before I knew it, a tall woman was standing beside me.

"Oozuka Mai sure draws attention again, doesn’t she..."

The girl with a stern face was Takada Himiko, a student from Class 1B who leads some kind of group. She was the one I had a bit of a conflict with during the recent sports event, but now we only exchange greetings when we see each other. We’ve settled into that kind of relationship... or at least, I think we have.

"Ah... um, good morning, Takada-san."

"Good morning."

See? She even returned the greeting! Our relationship is in a good place!

That said, Takada-san still looked quite displeased.

"Seriously... there's nothing but protests in this situation..."

"Haha..."

I give a somewhat awkward smile, unable to say much.

Takada-san had worked as a model when she was younger, but her popularity was snatched away by Mai, and she apparently retired after that. Since then, she’s seen Mai as a rival. She's like a version of Satsuki-san with a different color.

"Anyway, look at this crowd."

"Really. Just because that Mai Oozuka announced her engagement, all these idle people are chirping away, it’s ridiculous."

Such a harsh way to put it...

"Indeed, Mai Oozuka is number one in terms of attention among active models. She even placed first in this year’s 'Model’s Most Admired Model Ranking.' She’s an influencer with a wide following, from teens to older generations. But even so, to this extent..."

...Huh?

"She's appeared on many major TV programs, with both influence and recognition at a high level. She's the driving force that elevated Queen Rose’s brand to a global scale. And despite interacting with various male celebrities, she’s never been involved in any scandals, which makes this announcement a sensational topic. But... those shallow people can be so disgusting, don't you think?"

"Uh..."

"You're very knowledgeable, Takada-san."

I was met with a glare so intense it almost felt like it could make a sound. Eek.

"...Of course, that's obvious. Oozuka Mai is the person I'll crush one day. Haven't you heard the saying, 'Know your enemy and know yourself, and you will never be in danger in a hundred battles'? How ridiculous... No, It's making my whole stomach hurt!"

"S-Sure..."

I decided not to delve further into that topic.

If anyone finds out that I’m dating Mai, it would be a huge problem... It’s going to get really complicated.

"Ah, here it comes. The limousine."

"Oozuka Mai...!!"

As soon as the limousine arrived at the school gate, Takada-san bit down on the white handkerchief she pulled out from somewhere. Wow.

There are actually people who do things like this in real life... The world might be filled with far more interesting people than I thought.

A woman got out of the driver's seat (it wasn't Hanatori-san) and opened the door.

The moment Mai stepped out, the crowd closed in with a loud *whoosh* ! In an instant, she disappeared into the swarm of people.

"Wow, she's super popular…"

I already knew, but seeing it again like this was overwhelming. She looked like a princess adored by everyone in the entire country.

"What... someone else just got out of the limousine...! Is that the fiancée...!?"

Takada-san, who is more than 15 centimeters taller than me, seems to be able to see what's happening in the crowd. I try jumping up and down, but I can't even see the tops of their heads.

"To think she'd bring her fiancée all the way to school... Could it be, she's doing this just to show off to me...!?"

"Yeah, I don't think that's the case!"

I tone down my response to her paranoid assumption before voicing it. Right after, a high-pitched "Kyaa!" echoed around.

"Huh? What? What happened?"

At this point, asking Takada-san would be faster than jumping up to see. With a face like a chess player deliberating their next move, she informed me.

"…It's nothing significant. Oozuka Mai kissed her fiancé's hand. It’s just a demonstration for the mass communication media."

"I see."

I’ve never heard anyone say “mass communication media” without shortening it before...

After that, the limousine, presumably with the fiancé on board, drove off.
Mai was still surrounded by students and the media, unable to move. I turned to Takada-san, who was biting down harder on her handkerchief, and asked her.

"U-um... was the other person a woman?"

"It looked like it. Same-sex marriage is legal in France, so it's probably not uncommon there. ...Ah, I see. This whole fuss might be because there are people here just for the spectacle."

Takada-san was talking to herself, coming to her own conclusions. I just mumbled, "Hmm."

Well, I guess it’s fine, though.
Mai must have her own reasons for what she’s doing.

"As I thought..."

Takada-san suddenly turned to me, as if realizing something, and nodded understandingly.

"It seems that even though you're in the same group, you have some feelings about Oozuka Mai."

"Huh?"

"You looked like you were thinking something along the lines of 'This isn't amusing.' "

"Uh, well..."

Takada-san smiled at me with a soft, knowing smile.

"If you want to stab Oozuka Mai in the back, I'll help you. You can always transfer to Class B."

"I won't do that!"

And so, even after Oozuka Mai came to the classroom, she was surrounded by people for a while, and we couldn't find a good moment to talk alone.

During lunch break, I finally had the chance to talk with Mai on the rooftop.

"Well..."

Mai, leaning against the rooftop railing, was clearly showing signs of exhaustion. She groaned while deliberately avoiding eye contact with me.

"I'm really a bit worn out…"

"Thank you for your hard work," I said, gently patting her on the shoulder.

When talking one-on-one like this, it's clear, as expected, that Mai is still Mai. There's no sign of any change. Even though she's tired, she's still beautiful, with no cloud over her dazzling shine.

The rooftop in November was a bit chilly. Still, it was better than trying to talk in the hallway. In the end, this place felt the most comfortable.

"Sorry. I couldn't get in touch yesterday."

"Uh-huh,"
Mai said.

When I first heard the news about her engagement, I really wanted to shout, "What the heck!?" but after a night, I had calmed down. In that sense, maybe it was actually better that we're talking today, not yesterday. Yesterday, I was already overwhelmed with things related to my sister.

But the thing is, there's no way Mai, who always says how much she likes me, could have been secretly cheating. I can feel how much she cares about me, so there must be some sort of reason behind this.

Today, I was extremely calm. To be able to act this composed after hearing that my girlfriend has an engagement—it's impressive, really. As expected of me. A woman who has absolutely no interest in romance.

Maybe it would have been more interesting if I had bitten my handkerchief and said, "What do you mean by an engagement?!" and gone off on her, but I didn't, because that would just make Mai uncomfortable...

"Anyway, can I explain?" she asked.

"Go ahead," I replied.

"This whole thing was something my mother did on her own," Mai explained.

As expected.

"My mother had always planned for me to settle down once I became an adult. It's an outdated idea, but she had been searching for a suitable partner for me all this time. Do you remember when I held that matchmaking party a while ago?"

"Yes, I remember."

"After that, my mother became even more determined that I couldn't be trusted to handle it myself. So, the fiancé was chosen then. I thought it was just a passing concern and half ignored it, but…"

"I see."

"Apparently, the whole thing moved forward without me saying anything. And then, with this recent situation, they went ahead and made an announcement without consulting me. It's quite troublesome. I'm planning to strongly protest and have the statement retracted."

"I see, so that's what happened."

"Yeah..."

I nod calmly. I 100% understand her reasoning.

The fact that Mai held the matchmaking party could, in a way, be partially my responsibility, but even so, it's completely unreasonable to just assign and announce a fiancé for her without her consent.

In this case, Mai is completely not at fault. She's just a victim.

I was able to calmly assess every situation.

"By the way..."

"Yes?"

Mai had a strained smile on her face. She must have been really tired. Poor Mai...

"Why have you been using polite language this whole time?"

"Huh!?!"

Crap. I let out a really loud voice.

I stared at Mai in shock. Now that I think about it, that’s true. I was completely unconscious of it.

Polite language...?

Why am I...?

"I feel like there's a bit of distance between us..."

"Huh, no! No, that's not it at all!"

Again. The words that came out of my mouth automatically turned into polite speech.

Why!?

"Could it be, are you mad at me?"

"Me... mad?"

I had no idea what Mai was talking about. No, I’m ultra-hyper calm, so I completely understand every word Mai explained, and I get that the one to blame is Mai’s mother... but...

"Why would I have any reason to be angry?"

"Well..."

For some reason, Mai was sweating on her cheeks. It’s already November.

"If you hear that your partner has an engagement... I think anyone would get angry..."

"Anyone...? Even me...!?"

I asked back, still confused.
"Why...?"

"Huh? Well... um... You might feel like you're being taken lightly, and then start doubting the other person's feelings, or maybe get jealous..."

There it is again! Jealousy!

"But I don’t know Mai's fiancé, so... what kind of person are they? Are you acquainted with them?"

"The other person... is my childhood friend."

A certain girl with black hair appeared in my mind.

"But it's not Satsuki, though."

The black-haired girl I had imagined clicked her tongue and withdrew.

"I've lived a life going back and forth between Japan and France since I was young. She’s my childhood friend from France. We’re both models, friends... It’s like family. She's honest, cute, beautiful. A very wonderful woman."

"Wow..."

Mai made a face that seemed to say "Oops."

"No, that's not it. I’ve never had romantic feelings for her. Not even a little bit."

"I see..."

"Why are you looking away?! Is the emotional distance between us getting even greater?!"

"No, I'm just average in class... I was born and raised in Japan, never been abroad, and I met Mai when we entered high school... I can't be honest at all, and I try my best to look decent, but I'm just your typical, mass-produced girl... Hehe..."

"But I love you just the way you are!"

Mai grabs my shoulder.

"The one I love is you, and only you—"

Her intense gaze makes my heart skip a beat.

I know that putting myself down too much will only trouble Mai. Self-deprecation from someone who's fortunate is the thing I hate the most...

Let me say it again: I can clearly feel that Mai likes me. So, I tried to smile and say, "Of course, I trust you, Mai."

However, it didn’t quite work out.

"Re... Renako...?"

My vision was slightly blurry. Could it be...?

Am I getting teary-eyed...!?

"I'm sorry... I made you anxious..."

"Eh, no, this is..."

For a moment, an image flashed in my mind.

Mai walking arm in arm with someone I don't know. Smiling at someone I don't know, placing a hand on the cheek of someone I don't know, kissing someone I don't know...

No, that's... To get teary-eyed over such a trivial thought...

I'm acting like I'm 'menhera,' aren't I?

Yesterday, just hearing Nashiji Komachi's name shattered my heart! It’s all a mess now!

"Umm..."

"Y-yeah, Renako..."

A faint voice slips out.

"Am I… going to be abandoned?"

"No, that's not happening! Absolutely not! I won't abandon you!"

Mai says, unusually quickly and forcefully.

"The only person I will marry is Amaori Renako! And there is no one else! It's okay, trust me!"

"…"

This might be the first time I've seen Mai this flustered. Yet I couldn't shake off the bad thoughts from my mind. It was probably because Mai had become an incredibly important person to me.

It's not that I don't trust Mai, but I'm afraid of losing her. That's why I feel so anxious.

"But, I never heard about this childhood friend of yours in France..."

"It's not that I was hiding anything shameful. I just didn't think it was necessary to mention. I figured you wouldn't be very interested."

"She's honest, cute, and a very wonderful woman..."

"I'm sorry. It was wrong of me to compliment another woman in front of you... It was an inappropriate thing to do... I'm reflecting on it. I'm sorry."

I looked up at Mai with teary eyes.

"R-Renako...?"

"Am I going to be abandoned...? Was I just a convenient playmate until you got married...?"

"N-No, that's not what I meant at all! I would never do something so unfaithful! The only person I love is you!"

Uu... Only Mai's words that serve as a bandage, healing the cracks in my shattered heart

"Then, who do you like more, me or her...?"
"Of course, it's you!"

"Really...? Then, how much do you like me?"

"I like you more than anything in the world."

At Mai's sincere words, my heart skipped a beat.
I want more. I want to hear more of Mai's sincere words...!

"Really? Really, really?"

"Of course. Stay by my side forever, Renako. You are my everything."

"Really, really, really...? If you're lying, Renako won't forgive you."

"I swear, I will love you forever—"

Right after that, something slammed into the back of my head.

Ouch!

I held my head and turned around.

"How long are you going to keep flirting? I'll kill you!"

It was Satsuki-san.

"Seriously... if you had kept going for just a little longer, I would've thrown both of you off the roof. That was a close one."

"Isn't the real danger Saa-chan's self-control?"

"Ahaha..."

To my surprise, there were people hiding behind the rooftop door, secretly watching our dramatic exchange. And not just one—three of them.

Koto Satsuki.
Koyanagi Kaho.
Sena Ajisai.

These three were members of my strongly connected group of five friends in Class 1-A, called the 'Quintet.' They also happened to be the ones who knew about my relationship with Mai.

"Why are you here?"
Mai asks the question.

Koto Satsuki—an extraordinary beauty with jet-black hair and Mai's childhood friend from Japan. She is a significant figure to us, always demonstrating that good looks and a good personality don’t necessarily go hand in hand.

Satsuki-san brushes her hair back and answers,
"I thought it might be entertaining if things got complicated, so I decided to take a peek."

She said it as if exercising an obvious right.

Amazing. When someone is that shameless, there’s nothing you can fault them for. As expected of Satsuki-san. Truly admirable.

"Saa-chan was worried about Rena-chin and MaiMai, you know. That’s why I came along, too!"

With a cheerful smile, Koyanagi Kaho adds her comment. A cute, small animal-like girl, Kaho-chan's charming fang teeth, which occasionally peeked out, made her even more adorable. She's an important person who can confidently make playful remarks to both Mai and Satsuki-san without hesitation.

"That’s not it. Don’t say things like that, Kaho,"
Satsuki-san says firmly.

"Okay, okay, sorry~,"
Kaho-chan smoothly deflects Satsuki's pressure with a smile. After all, the fact that these two call each other by their first names shows how close they are.

"Ugh, but spying is still not okay… Sorry, though,"

Ajisai-san apologizes, bowing her head as if representing the three of them.

The angel of Ashigaya, known as Sena Ajisai, is an important person who has shown the world that beauty and personality can sometimes be perfectly in sync. Well, that could also be said about Mai and Kaho-chan.

But honestly, it feels like the one who has the most right to listen to our conversation is probably someone like Ajisai-san...

"I owe you an apology too, Ajisai..."

Mai, looking a little down, lowers her head.

Then, Ajisai-san waves her hand, saying, "Ah, no, it's okay. I was a little surprised, but I figured there must be something going on."

"That said, if I'd stopped things a little sooner, you wouldn't have had to feel uneasy."
"Well... that might be true," Sena Ajisai smiled gently.

"Nobody's perfect, so it's okay. There's nothing we can do to prevent unexpected things from happening, right? My little brothers do things every day that make me think, 'Why would they do that?'"

She laughed a bit embarrassed.

"So, I think what's more important is how we talk things through and come to an understanding when things like that happen."

"...Ah, thank you."

"Hehe, you're welcome."

The two exchanged smiles, creating a warm and pleasant atmosphere.

...Hmm? It's almost as if there are beautiful flowers blooming and sparkling around Mai and Ajisai.

Wait, isn't this a little different from when it's me?

"Sena really is amazing. Sena really is," Satsuki said, she murmured in a way that seemed like a sharp remark aimed at my pity.

That's strange. I wanted to be in that kind of pleasant situation too...

But then again, when it comes to self-esteem and self-affirmation, there's no comparison between me and Ajisai-san... My mental state is like a straw house, while Ajisai-san is made of reinforced concrete. She wouldn't budge even in the face of a strong storm.

Well, it's fine... No one is perfect after all... Ajisai-san's words always give me hope.

The three of us—me, Mai, and Ajisai-san—share a special bond.

Mai and I are lovers, and Mai and Ajisai-san are lovers, and Ajisai-san and I are lovers. In other words, we're all dating each other.

It might sound strange, but the only reason this human relationship can stay balanced is thanks to Ajisai-san, who is probably the greatest balancer in the universe. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that.

We've been together for a little over a month now. Without any major conflicts, we've been steadily spending our days together. In that sense, this whole fiancée commotion might be the first real trouble to come our way.

Satsuki crossed her arms.
"Even so, aunty really went for quite the forceful approach."

"Yeah… By the way, Satsuki, have you met her yet?"

By "her," he was referring to Mai's fiancée.

"…No."

Satsuki slowly shook her head.

"Huh? You're acquainted with Mai's fiancée, Satsuki-san?"

"Ah, that's right. When we were kids, Satsuki did some modeling too."

I know that. One of the hardcore "MaiSatsu" fans (Hanatori-san) even showed me some footage.

"Because of that connection, when we went to France together, the three of us would always hang out."

Satsuki spoke up, sounding a bit annoyed.
"Correction. I wasn’t really 'modeling.' I just tagged along to the studio a few times and had some photos taken. As for going to France, that was only because Mai kept pestering me, so I went along."

"That's right. She went along with me. Satsuki's kind like that."

Mai smiled, and Satsuki clicked her tongue.

She might be cursed to click her tongue whenever she gets complimented. Poor thing. Since my mental state is a bit fragile right now, I get how Satsuki feels about not being able to be honest...

"I hope that curse gets lifted someday and you develop a decent personality, Satsuki-san..."

She grabbed my face.

Eh?! Ow! Ow, that hurts!! Is it normal for a high school girl to just grab another girl's face like this!?

"I bet she wants to see you too. She was really attached to you, wasn’t she?"

"That was when we were kids. She’s probably forgotten all about it by now."

Satsuki quickly let go of me and shrugged.

I'm shocked. Even though my face just got grabbed, the conversation is continuing without a hitch...

Wait, what? Do they think this is just a regular occurrence? I just got my face grabbed you know...!?

Even Ajisai-san didn’t stop her! She's just looking at us with a face that says, "Wow, they sure get along!" No, we don't! Right now, this is a case of an assailant and a victim! Should I take this all the way to the Supreme Court!?

As I sat there with unresolved feelings, Kaho-chan poked my back and said, "Oh yeah, by the way..."

"Rena-chin, did something happen with Serara?"

"...Huh!?"

That topic was, in fact, far more delicate for me right now than Mai’s fiancée situation. I hastily covered my mouth, making sure my heart didn’t leap out of it.

"N-no!? Nothing at all—I mean, I don't think so!?"

Crap! I dodged the question on reflex! No, wait, that’s not what I meant to do…!

Kaho-chan, however, didn’t seem too concerned.

"Hmm. She said she wanted to get in touch with you, though?"

"O-oh, really? I wonder whyyy. So mysterious, so strange—"

Ugh...

But if I actually talked about running away, I’d have to explain how I used to skip school... and how I used to be a total introvert...

It’s not that I don’t trust the members of Quintet. But it’s not exactly an entertaining story, and it would probably just make them uncomfortable.

…Or at least, that’s just an excuse. Maybe I simply want to protect the last, tiny fragment of my pride.

I ran away from Minato-san, the person whom Seira-san introduced me to. I’m a criminal... It’s 400 percent my fault… Yes…

Could it be that Seira-san also tried to contact me on my phone…?

I checked my phone. There were messages. Over 999 of them.

Scary!
Wait, are all of these from Seira-san!? Scary…

No, it’s not just that. There were messages on my personal social media accounts too. Not just from Seira-san’s main account, but probably from her sub-accounts as well… She’s using every possible way to contact me…

This… When you actually experience it, it’s seriously terrifying…

What do I do…? No, there’s nothing I can do. It’s the same thing. If I admit why I ran away, I’ll have to explain everything that’s connected to it, and that would just make this whole situation even messier.

But I don’t have the confidence to dodge it properly either… Sorry, but I’m just going to ignore this one…

When my mental state recovers, I’ll talk to you again…
Before I knew it, I had frozen with my phone in hand, and everyone’s eyes were on me.

Ugh.

"Uh, well..."

With everyone’s attention on me—

"For now, um, Mai! I hope things work out well! Yeah!"

I spat out completely meaningless, empty words.

"Yeah, that's right. It might take some time to sort things out, but... trust me, both of you."

For now, we decided to leave the fiancée issue in Mai’s hands. As expected of Mai. The sense of reassurance she gives is on another level. She's nothing like me.

And in reality, that was exactly the case.

Yes... That evening on my way home, I would come to realize—

That someone as insignificant as me—everything I had done had already been seen through long ago.

* * *

After that, I properly apologized to Mai for causing trouble by becoming a mess.

Mai, who felt responsible, was kind. (I’m trash.)

I want to be there for Mai...

Well, even if I were to be driven by a sense of duty and shout, "Yes, yes, I’m the true fiancée of Mai!" I don’t think anyone would take me seriously...

Maybe if it were Ajisai-san...

I’m no use to anyone.

I trudged home slowly.

I got off at the nearest station, right in front of my house. And at the most vulnerable moment, I was suddenly...

I was pinned to the wall by someone.

Eh!?!?

I was trapped between a mysterious figure and the concrete.

"You’re making me work hard, aren't you, senpa~i..."

With nowhere to run, the girl glaring at me from below was...

"S-S-S-Seira-san!?"

"Hehe, what’s this? You’re looking at me like you’ve seen a ghost..."

In reality, a lock of her hair was hanging near her mouth, giving off a rather ghostly vibe. I trembled as I pressed my back firmly against the wall.

"I-I didn’t expect to run into Seira-san here... it’s such a coincidence..."

"It’s no coincidence! It’s an ambush, an ambush!"

Her eyes, sharp with fury, locked onto me.

"You told me, didn’t you!? That you wanted to trust Haruna! Such noble words! And yet... why are you running away!? What’s going on!?"

"Ugh,I mean... there’s a really complicated situation behind it..."

As I tried to crawl out of the kabe-don position, Seira-san’s shoes blocked my way. Eek.

"Do you think I’m just going to let you go!? I want you to give back even just a little bit of the feeling I got from your words!!"

"Huh? R-Really? Was I cool? Hehehe..."

"Don’t act shy! You idiot! You fool!"

"Uuuuuu I’m so sorry..."

It was just a joke to lighten the mood, but I ended up making things worse... I’m hopeless at conversation...

Seira-san removed her hands and feet, then changed her expression to a composed face.

"Well, it's fine."

"I see, that's a relief!"

"The 'fine' just now means 'let's put that aside for now,' okay!? Should we start over with Japanese lessons from preschool!?"

At this point, I was relieved I had the sense not to say, "Hehe, Seira-san, there’s no Japanese class in preschool☆."

I shrank back with a little "eek."

"So, could you start over for me? O-nee-san Senpai?"

"Start over...?

Seira-san smoothly moved to the right.

There, standing uncertainly, was a girl with black hair.
Minato-san—Nashiji Minato-san.

"Eeek!"
This time, I was genuinely scared.

"What is this... What is going on...?"
Minato-san furrowed her brows in displeasure.

I turned to Seira-san.

"Did I do something?"

"I don't knooow~"

Seira-san raised both hands and shrugged.
With a sigh, Minato-san looked me in the eyes.

"Amaori-san, wasn't there something you wanted to ask me?"

"Well, um..."

I darted my eyes around endlessly.

"If you run away like that, of course I'm going to be curious."

Minato-san calmly questioned me.

"Did something happen with my big sister?"

"Ah, um..."
That's right. Back then, I asked for Minato-san's big sister's name. And the moment her name was mentioned, I ran away.It was only natural for Minato-san to ask me that.

A tingling numbness spread through my fingertips. Letting out this discomfort would be easy.

I just have to confess. That your sister bullied me. I don't want to say it. Because that's a lie. That never happened.

I successfully reinvented myself in high school—I'm a popular, outgoing person now. If I say it out loud—if I admit to my miserable past—it feels like everything I am now will fall apart.

All the effort I've put in—all of it—feels like it will just disappear.

There's no way I can say it━.

"Uuu..."
I dropped to my knees on the spot.

"Hey...?"

"Onee-san Senpai...?"

And just like that, I broke down in tears.
"Uuuuuuuu..."

And then—

Completely unable to hold a conversation with me, Seira-san and Minato-san struggled for a while before eventually leaving. They simply said they'd come back another day to hear me out properly.

I was still far from being free.

"...I'm home."
I opened the front door and sluggishly took off my shoes.

Was this... a punishment?

Someone like me, with no real ability, no real resolve, had just tried to act like an big sister—tried to play the part—and ended up getting involved in something far beyond my capabilities...

And in the end, I got blindsided from a completely unexpected direction—taking a blow so severe, I could barely stand. And there was nowhere to escape.

This place felt like the end of everything.

"Big sis..."
My little sister was coming down the stairs.

I couldn’t help but flinch. I hurriedly tried to compose my expression.
"W-what?"

She had a strangely frightening look on her face.
"What were you talking about?"

"Huh?"

"I heard voices. Seira and Minato. They were here, weren't they?"

"Ah..."
I turned pale for real this time.
There was no escape.

I averted my gaze.
"Nothing, really..."

Even so, I still tried to run.
Pathetically, inside this narrow cage.

"....."

My sister stood beside me.

"…… Oh, I see.
She lost interest in an instant and passed by.

My heartbeat echoed in my ears. For a while, I stood frozen in place.

I wondered why. Tears were about to fall again, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut to hold them back. Until yesterday, I had been so determined to save my sister from truancy.

It felt like a distant past.

I just wanted to save myself. That was all that remained. I wished that everyone who knew my past would disappear from this world.

But—on the next morning.

As I stood in front of the sink with a dull expression, my sister appeared beside me.

"Good morning."

"Hmm... G-Good morning. You're up early today."
As I nervously returned the greeting—
My sister stood there, wearing her middle school uniform.

"…Huh?"
I blinked repeatedly.

"Let me borrow that for a sec."

Snatching the hairdryer from my hand, she quickly adjusted her hairstyle on the spot. With efficient movements, she handed the hairdryer back to me and started to walk away.

I called out to her back.
"W-Wait a sec!?"

"Hm?"

My sister glanced back over her shoulder, her eyes silently asking, "Do you need something?"

For a moment, I swallowed my words.

"Uh, um… w-what's going on?"

In a tone that suggested she hadn't even considered any other possibility, she stated matter-of-factly—

"I'm going to school."

She briskly walked away.

Left standing there, I held a comb in my right hand and a hairdryer in my left.

I let out a long, drawn-out groan.

"Eeeeeehhhhhh...?"

What is this sudden turn of events?

A Tale of Amaori Haruna – Part 2

"Hey, look! What do you think this is? Hehe... A message from my friend☆ (smug face)"

My big sister—Amaori Renako—was as giddy as ever today.

So freaking annoying...

Ever since she entered high school, my big sister has seemed to be having the time of her life (?).

Whenever Haruna is just lazing around in her room, studying, or watching videos, her older sister barges in for no reason, boasting loudly about how fulfilling her high school life is.

Sigh. Good for you...

I responded absentmindedly, and like a fidget spinner that keeps spinning with just a little push, she continued rambling endlessly.

"And then, and then! There's this girl named Sena who sits right in front of me, and she's super cute! And she's so kind—so much so that she doesn't even seem like a normal human! She's a girl blessed with everything from heaven… Maybe she's not even human..."

My big sister pondered with a serious look on her face.

I started to worry.

Is she saying things this nonsensical in class too?

I hope she isn’t, but since my big sister is always this incoherent at home, there’s no way she’s managing to act normal outside…

"Well, the group I'm in now is made up of incredible people, like… President! Queen! Prime Minister! Emperor! That kind of vibe… It's literally sparkling! It's not a metaphor, it really feels like a corner of the class is glowing! They have such an overwhelming aura… If I follow these people, I won't be isolated for the year… Hehe…"

I see

Well, positioning yourself like that is important. It's good to secure your spot.

These people who put up with someone like my big sister… They must be really, really kind...

"Wait a second... If I get abandoned by them, I might go back to being alone... I need to flatter them more... Maybe I should laugh out loud at every little joke they make..."

"You're way too emotionally unstable."

She was talking lightly just a moment ago, but now she's sulking and holding her head.

She started practicing flattery in front of the mirror, saying, "Ahaha... so funny..."

Haruna looked at her big sister with a warm, uninterested gaze.

She must be really exhausted every day...

When I entered middle school last year, it wasn't like this.

Part of it was because about half of the students came from the local elementary school.

On the other hand, my big sister chose a high school where she knew no one and took the entrance exam. She apparently aimed for a school with an academic level right at the edge of what she could handle.

I seriously wondered what she would've done if she had failed, but knowing my big sister, she probably hadn’t thought that far ahead.

Her life is like walking on a tightrope—like a phone that’s always running on just 1% battery. Even so, she’s managing to function for now—just barely.

"Well, for now, things are going well, right?"

As I asked that, she froze in place. (In that brief pause, I could tell exactly what she was thinking—she was reflecting on her past experiences at school, trying to decide whether she could really say things were going well.) Then, she looked up at me.

She opened her mouth hesitantly.

"Probably…"

"Then that's great! Your high school debut is a big success!"

"F-For now… I guess…"

"Why do you sound so unsure…? Think back to how you were before starting high school."

"Ugh…"

My big sister held her head with both hands as if trying to endure a headache.

"I-I’ve become normal… Haven’t I…?"

"Completely normal. You look like a proper human. Before long, even strangers will start asking you for directions."

"Proof that I'm a real person! But I don't want strangers to talk to me!"

She let out a scream, but immediately after, she let out a creepy chuckle. Maybe no one would actually ask her for directions. She was keeping it together when she was outside… right?

"That I… could actually live a normal school life like this… Hehehe."

At that moment, my big sister laughed freely.

It wasn't the smile she wore to fit in with the popular kids—it was the one she was meant to have all along.

Getting carried away when praised was an unfortunate habit of the Amaori sisters. Even if it was just her older sister complimenting her, she couldn't help but feel good about it.

Chapter 6 : Is it impossible to try challenging this again from here?

It seems that my little sister really headed to school. Should I follow her...? I was annoyed, but before I could even act on it, she quickly left the house.

She kept insisting she wasn't going, so what the heck...!?

Well, it’s obviously a good thing that she went to school, but... I just don’t feel at ease about it at all.

Maybe the little sister I knew is long gone, and somewhere along the way, she’s been replaced by an alien. It's a terrifying and absurd thought, but I couldn't help but think that I just couldn't understand what my sister was thinking anymore.

Or is it that? Maybe human resentment isn’t as dramatic as it seems, and one day, it just gets resolved...

Like the weather, or hormones...?

But when I look back on myself...

The reason I stopped skipping school was because I saw an old friend's post on social media. My family probably thought, 'Wait, suddenly she’s motivated in the morning?!' It might have seemed a little like a horror story.

Certainly... When I think about it that way, maybe Haruna’s situation isn’t so unnatural after all...

That day, I came home feeling restless and unable to concentrate. After a while, at the usual time when club activities ended and people were returning home, my little sister came back, saying, 'I’m home!'"

She seemed to have forgotten everything from yesterday, and of course, that felt really strange...

But if I went to school after skipping, and people started saying things like 'Wow, you’re going to school!' or 'What happened?! Why did you go to school?!' I’d feel really bad, so... I had no choice but to just let it slide...

I never thought I'd be confronted with my own guilt through my little sister... I didn't realize I had made my family worry so much...

For now, my kind-hearted family was relieved that my little sister went to school. And that was undeniably a return to the peaceful, "normal days" we knew...

Happily ever after!—it must have been the easiest for everyone to accept that.

"Hey..."

My little sister, sitting on the living room sofa fiddling with her phone, responded without looking up, "Hmm?"

Um...

The air felt heavy.

But this was probably just something I was feeling on my own.

My sister doesn’t think much of me. But if that's the case... no matter what I ask, no matter what I say, it might be pointless.

...No, I can't do it. It's impossible after all.

"Sorry, never mind."

"Mmm..."

In the end, I don't know what started or ended inside my sister's mind.

I was still thrown off my pace, shoved back into the box of everyday life.

* * *

For now, as a form of closure, I thought I should inform to the Quintet about my sister going to school, so I did.

Everyone of course seemed happy. Or maybe not... Perhaps, because I looked like I wasn't really feeling it, they exaggerated their happiness to cheer me up, just pretending to be excited...

This is bad—nothing feels certain...! Once I start doubting one thing, I end up doubting everything! Could it be that I'm the only one alive in this world, and everything beyond what I can see is just a facade...? What if the world was created only five minutes ago!?

At this point, my only remaining support is Mai.

The other day at the dinner gathering, I thought that the advice Mai gave my sister might be the key to the answer...

"She said she'd go to school in two months, right? But it's only been about two weeks... Mai, do you know anything?"

I tried to find a chance to ask Mai, who was still caught up in her fiancé fever...

"Sorry, but I don't know either."

"Ugh, I see…"

Mai thought for a moment before speaking.

"Maybe Haruna-kun’s priorities have changed in her mind."

"Priorities?"

"Maybe she decided she couldn't afford to skip school anymore. …No, that's just speculation. But if there's one thing I can say, it's that you should keep watching over her for a while. Given time, she'll probably be able to talk about it."

Mai’s gentle reassurance was undoubtedly the right thing to say.

At the very least, I had no reason to deny it.

"…Yeah, you're right."

In the end, I gave up trying to figure it out. If even Mai didn't know, then there was no way I could.

As the cold days grew harsher, Ashigaya High School entered the period of midterm exams.

When things aren’t going well, nothing seems to go right. The results of the exams seemed to reflect that feeling, as they turned out terribly.

After the final day of exams, my remaining energy was completely drained, and I slumped onto the desk.

"Sigh..."

"You seemed to be feeling off, Rena-chan."
Ajisai-san laughs as she tugs at my hair.

"Well, I suppose..."

I wonder... Maybe I was just doing well by chance since April, and this is how I really am...

What goes up will eventually come back down. Right now, I'm in a period of random fluctuation...

"Do you feel like blowing off some steam?"

"Hmm... maybe..."

lift my face. While I would love to tangle my fingers in Ajisai-san's long, beautiful hair—though, of course, that's impossible—I instead tug at her sleeve lightly.

"Do you want to go somewhere, Ajisai-san?"

"Hmm~..."

Ajisai-san smiles awkwardly. Ah, this is the "I can't" smile!

"Sorry... I have to help out at home today. During the test period, I had to switch shifts and everything."

"Ah, I see. No, it's totally fine."

"Let’s hang out next time, okay? Next time."

"Yeah."

With a relaxed smile, I waved goodbye to Ajisai-san. Ajisai-san walked gracefully, and her back was cute too.

Well, I guess it can't be helped. I slowly started preparing to head home.

No, no. I've only been turned down by one person. I can't give up that easily.

After all, I have other friends too!

If I can't generate my own energy, I'll have to get it from someone else. I guess I'll gather some courage and invite someone!

No, I know. I knew it.

Of course, on a day like this, no one’s around to catch.

"Mai is working. Satsuki is working part-time. Kaho-chan has other plans... I'm the only one in the world with nothing to do..."

With my backpack feeling heavier than usual, I trudged down the hallway. I've always been someone who's fine being alone. I mean, I can do most things by myself. But shopping and going to the salon—those are high hurdles for me, so I tend to avoid them!

So, when school finished early because of the test, I should’ve been excited to go home and play games. That’s the usual me.

But instead, I feel lonely... A hollow wind blows. Why...?

Laughter from somewhere completely unrelated to me makes my chest feel even tighter.

Ah, I’m all alone in the world... No one loves me...

"Ah."

At that moment, I caught sight of a familiar figure from behind. I usually just wait for someone to talk to me, but today, I want to take the first step...! I want to exchange words with someone and prove that I exist...!

Come on... Gather your courage...!

"Youko-chan. Heading home now?"

The moment I spoke, trying my best to sound calm...
Youko-chan whipped around with such force, as if she were being chased by someone. It startled me a little.

"W-What?"

Like a traffic light changing colors, Youko-chan's serious expression instantly switched to a smile.

"Oh… Renako-kun, are you heading home now!?"

"Y-Yeah, I am."

Youko-chan simply repeated my question back to me.

She—Terusawa Youko-chan—is a bright and energetic girl who always speaks clearly, with a touch of calculated cuteness.

But today… she seems a little off.

"Huh? Umm, wasn't this the right mode…? No, it should be fine… Uh, anyway! The test was tough, right!? Especially the math—it was quite a challenge!"

"Y-Yeah. It was hard."

What should I do? Is it okay to point it out…? Like, "You seem a bit flustered."

Youko-chan is usually pretty laid-back, so this is unusual for her.

But saying, 'You seem kinda off, lol,' to someone acting strangely might come off as teasing.

That's right. As someone who frequently glitches out myself, I tend to appreciate it when people just let it slide. This is something I've learned from my past experiences. In other words, it's data.

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry. I got a bit flustered there. I was thinking about something else."

Oh no, this isn't in the data… What should I do…?

"U-Um, is something wrong? Did you not do well on the test?"

"Mm… that might be part of it, yeah…"

Youko-chan gives a wry smile.

She touched me first, but now it seems like she doesn’t want to be touched! Why?!

Ugh, I don’t get the subtleties of being a girl... I wish conversations would always give me three choices to pick from...

I gave up. New topic! Let's switch gears!

"Hey, what's that?"

Youko-chan was holding something that looked like a memo paper. This will be an easy way to start a conversation!

Then, Youko-chan stiffened her expression. (!?)

"Ah, um, this... well, I recently got a pet! I have to buy things like food and other stuff! This is the list for it!"

"Pet! Food! List!"

Topics. Topics keep coming one after another. A gold rush of topics has begun.

"What kind of pet did you get?"

"...Huh!?"

Huh!? Was that wrong!?

No, no, the flow was fine, right!? It's a normal question, right!? I'm the one slowly panicking. This is crazy, the data isn't working...!

Youko-chan was looking around with her eyes, clearly flustered.

"What kind of, what kind of pet... um, it's white, big... and a bit of a brat, I guess!"

"Let's hang out next time! For sure, definitely! No matter what!"

"Huh!? O-okay."

I nodded, overwhelmed by her energy.

Then, as if she had finally completed her task, Youko-chan walked away.

Something felt… off. Youko-chan's attitude was different from usual, and I was completely overwhelmed. I stood there, dumbfounded. Maybe… human relationships aren't something you can analyze with data after all.

Well, taking care of a pet does mean being responsible for a life. I was starting to understand why Youko-chan had been acting strangely. It must be tough when you're not used to it.

I’d like to have a cat, a dog, or maybe even a koala someday, but that’s probably impossible…I mean, I wouldn’t be able to sleep in anymore, right…?

I’m not cut out for that kind of responsibility. Life is scary.

"I'm home."

I arrived home.

Then, on the living room table, I found something unusual—a letter addressed to me (?).

"What’s this?"

I muttered to myself, but there was no one around to answer.

The only mail I usually get is postcards from the hair salon…

I glanced around furtively before secretly checking the letter. Stuff like this always makes my heart race.

I couldn’t help but let out a sound.

"Geh!"

It was an invitation to a class reunion. And not just any—my middle school reunion.

Goosebumps ran down my skin.

"There's no way I'm going to this!

I mean, what were they thinking? They’re probably sending this to everyone, but mailing it to someone like me, who barely attended school—that’s just completely inconsiderate! Seriously!

Damn it. The world is mocking me…

I felt like my eyes were growing darker and murkier by the second.

"I mean, it hasn't even been a year since we graduated, so what's the point…? If those people who love class reunions want to hang out so badly, they should just do it on their own instead of dragging the rest of us into it… They always leave introverts out anyway, right? Then just go ahead and do it without making a big deal… Having them act all considerate is the most annoying thing… Honestly, it's just a nuisance… I'm having fun in high school now, so I'd really rather not be reminded of bad memories… And this so-called organizer? I barely even know them… They're probably one of those nice, outgoing types… The kind of person people naturally gather around, the kind who actually believes that if they invite someone out, people will show up… Someone totally different from me… I'm just someone no one will ever love… destined to live alone and die alone…"

As I spilled out words like factory waste, I suddenly realized something.

"Huh!? What did I just say!?"

I placed my hand on my chest and listened to my heartbeat.

Oh no. My soul just reverted back to my middle school days!

"No, no! This isn't it! It must be some kind of mistake!"

I grabbed the invitation and rushed into my room. With a feeling as if explaining myself to God, I kneeled on the spot and clasped my hands together.

"No, no! I'm honored to be invited! It's amazing that you let me choose whether to go or not! Such consideration! Truly, the people from the reunion committee are incredible! They even care about someone like me, a nobody! So cool!"

I tried to cleanse my own darkness, unleashing a shower of words at full force.

"And also! A fear of reunions!? No, no, there's no way I have that! Ehehe! I'm not the same as I was in middle school! I'm not a gloomy person anymore! I'm a sunny person! Not just any sunny person, but a top-tier sunny person, who gets up and moves forward with the strength of my heart every time! I'm a true sunny person! I even have two girlfriends, can you believe it!? So amazing! My life is perfect, smooth sailing! It's like something to be admired! That's me! I'm in the first-year class A, and I'm part of the quintet!"

I grab the full-length mirror with both hands and smile at the top-tier sunny person in the reflection.

"Hey! Amaori Renako-chan, right!? You totally nailed your high school debut, didn't you!? Ehehe ♡ Actually, that's totally true ♡ It's amazing! I mean, you've got the kind of face that everyone would love, right? You're probably super popular in class, huh!? Eh ♡ Well... yeah, something like that ♡"

It's meaningless!

The wind blowing in my heart grows stronger. It feels like my consciousness is about to be blown away.

need to layer on more, more superficiality.

I quickly toss aside my uniform and change into the autumn clothes I recently bought with my sister (even though it's practically winter now).

That's right, at times like this, I should change my mood and go out into the city!

Because, you know, J-pop lyrics always say stuff like that!

Hehehe, I'll even put on some makeup. To change my mood, I should start with my appearance!

Come on, let's get hyped! I don’t have a specific plan, but anyway, let's just go out!

This house is haunted! By the evil spirit of my middle school self, Renako, who can't rest in peace!

I finished getting ready. A completely transformed beautiful girl stood there! There... there... well, let’s just say she was there...

I put in my familiar earphones, and hey, music—start!

I played my favorite dance number and went off to the sparkling world, going my way☆

And so, I ended up at a nearby supermarket.

Well... there wasn’t anywhere else to go...

I jumped to the new cup noodle shelf and muttered in my mind, "Hey, the usual ones are cheaper," and as I did that, I started feeling like, what am I even doing?

You know, introverts, when they're alone, their mood lifts or they start doing weird things. I totally get it... Well, I’m an extrovert, though...

No, this is it. I’ve reached my limit.

I’m going home.

I'll go home, take off my makeup, and play some games... that feels like a healthier option... it’ll probably help me recover mentally...

Why do they try to go out with no reason, these "sunny" people...?

There are always those who say their hobby is window shopping, but what’s fun about looking at things you don’t even want to buy? It’s like a poor boy who dreams of playing the trumpet, huh? Heh.

Wait, no! I’m ranting again!!

Since I heard Nashiji Komachi's name the other day, it's clear that my mental state has been slipping back to my middle school days.

I hate this... it's starting to affect my daily life...

What is this? Is this how I’m going to be from now on? Am I doomed to never escape from being "Amaori Renako"?

Should I change my name...?

Then, a mysterious figure in my head suggested, "How about Oozuka Renako?"

And not only that, but another person from the opposing side appeared and said, "I think 'Sena Renako' would suit you too."

This... there are more characters in my head now...

But it’s fine, it’s better than being alone. I nodded with a smile at their suggestions, "Yeah, that sounds good too." Hehe... Hehe, I wasn’t alone...

"...Renako-kun, what are you doing?"

That voice was surprisingly clear.

What am I doing? Well, fufu... I don’t even know myself. Humans are such mysterious creatures, right? But maybe that’s why they’re so endearing...☆

No, that’s not it. This isn’t a hallucination.

"Ah, Youko-chan!?"

It was Youko-chan, whom I had just parted ways with at school.

Yes! A person! This means I’m not alone anymore!

Then, Youko-chan made a face like "Oops!" Wait... what...?

"Ugh, I wasn’t planning to talk to you...! But you were making such an interesting face, so I couldn’t help myself!"

"What!? I didn’t do that!"

I protested, but Youko-chan repeated, like a detective forcing a confession, "No, you did..." Well, I didn’t, though.

"Here, proof in the form of a photo."

"Uwah!"

I raised my hands to cover my face as the phone was thrust in front of me. If I don’t see it, it’s like it didn’t happen! The world is shaped by my perception, after all!

Youko-chan, as usual, was smiling brightly.

"Sorry, sorry, I just got carried away and had fun."

"Ugh, you're so mean..."

But it’s okay, being teased by someone feels much better than being stabbed by my past… This pain, it calms me… I can be myself…

I see, so this is what it’s all about.

Suddenly, I arrived at the truth of the world. People make acquaintances and friends so they won’t be alone.

For example, if I were the type who didn’t need anything but the Quintet, I just want to be with my lover, that's enough. Love love ♡, Youko-chan wouldn’t have called out to me even if we crossed paths here.

I would have been cursed by my own words, turning into a zombie.

Youko-chan is from a neighboring class, but she's my friend. A friend... at least, I think she's my friend! Yes, because she's my friend, she spoke to me!

Now that I think about it, maybe it’s better to have more friends...?

Maybe I’ll make a million friends.

Youko-chan, who had probably just finished shopping, was carrying large shopping bags in both hands.

"Youko-chan, do you live around here?"

"Well, not exactly..."

"Oh, is that pet food?"

It's the one from the memo she had earlier.

"Y-Yeah! That's the kind of thing! Well, yeah! Wait, is there a problem!?"

For some reason, I was intimidated... Why...!?

When I flinched, Youko-chan quickly realized and cleared her throat.

"Well, yeah. But it can't be helped. Once you've agreed to something, no matter how annoying it is, you have to follow through for the money..."

"Y-Yeah."

Huh? It was as if there was a shadow in the sparkling girl's eyes...

I guess taking care of pets is tough. I could never do it. Youko-chan is amazing.

I extended my hand.

"But it seems tough. Want me to carry one?"

"Huh? No, no, it's fine. You were all dressed up, probably on your way to have fun, right? I'm okay, though. Thanks for worrying."

Youko-chan smiled her usual cute smile and shook her head.

Ah, it's bright... warm... I want to be on that side too...

"No, I was just wandering outside by myself..." (Just the truth)

"Ehh, but that would be bad..."

"I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me carry that..."

"It's fine, it's fine☆"

Ah...

"I see."

I stared at the ground.

It seems like it’s hopeless. I’m going to end up alone again....

"I can't even be of use to others... someone like me."

"Renako-kun???"

"Carrying bags—one of the most basic tasks humanity gained after walking on two legs—if I can't even do that properly, there's no way I can drive out the darkness in my heart. Sorry for being so presumptuous."

"What—what is this!? What's wrong with you!?"

As I turned around and started walking away, a voice called out from behind me.

"Alright, alright! I'll let you help! That's what you want, right!?"

Surely, my sincere feelings must have reached her. I’m so happy… I can still be with people. Ah, the light…

"Youko-chan. Thanks for letting me carry it. I'm really happy. Seriously, I appreciate it."

I bowed in a 5-7-5-7-7 rhythm.

Then, Youko-chan, walking beside me, pouted and muttered, "Well, earning some points just in case is important, after all..."

I had no idea what she meant, but maybe it was something like merit. I see, Youko-chan is living with an eye on reincarnation. What a grand life plan.

As I was thinking that—

Youko-chan stared at me intently and murmured—.

"Renako-kun, you're really different, aren't you?"

"...Is that so?"

Youko-chan nodded vigorously.

"I've transferred schools a lot, and I've had quite a few friends, but out of all of them, you're definitely one of the most... unique."

"You're so blunt about it."

I accept Youko-chan's words, somewhat absentmindedly.

"Well, I guess that's true then."

"Ah, you're admitting it."

"Huh?"

"I mean, I know I'm the one who said it, but... isn't it scary to be different?"

"Ahh."

I let out a small sound.

If it were the old me, I probably would have denied it with everything I had.

But the current me is someone who chose to not be normal. I mean, trying to claim I'm "normal" when I have two girlfriends is pretty much impossible...

"Maybe it's because the people around me are good people."
I murmured.

"The people around me accept me even if I'm different. So, I guess that makes me feel like it's okay, too."

"You mean people like Oozuka-san and Sena-san?"

"Pff!"

I instinctively turned my face away. Why those two, of all people!?

No way... You don’t know about it, do you, Youko-chan?

"And also Koto-san and Koyanagi-san."

"Ah, ahh, yeah! That's right! Everyone in Quintet!"
I somehow forced a smile.

"Hee~h. I see. They must be really nice."

"Seriously. Their level of humanity is just too high."

They're friends far too good for someone like me.

"So, that means you really love everyone in Quintet?"

"Y-yeah……"

Youko-chan was asking in such an embarrassing way. Well, I mean, yeah.

I mean, if you're around that level of humanity every day, anyone would end up liking them. They're a blessing. Even "Quintet’s Hungry Wolf," Koto Satsuki-san, is actually kind when it's just one-on-one.

In the next moment, I felt like Youko-chan’s eyes sparkled.

"Ohh, I see~. Rena-ko-kun, you really love everyone in Quintet, huh~? Not just your kano-pi, but all of them. Every single one of them."

"Uh, well… No, but she's not my kano-pi, okay? Kaho-chan isn't."

"By the way—"

Youko-chan inched closer to me.

Ah, this vibe… It's the same as when Youko-chan talks about love stories!

"So, who do you like the most?"

"Th-The most?"

"Yeah. Just between us. It's fine as long as it stays between us, okay? Just between us."

"The most…"

Choosing who I like the most in Quintet…

In a way, it's the ultimate question. There are probably a few standard answers.

"I love everyone ♡"

"I can't choose just one!"

But, even if I say something like that, I feel like Youko-chan would cheerfully dismiss it with, "Enough with that." Hmm... but still, still...

"Because Oozuka-san was the first person to become my friend, I like her the most..."

"Oh!"

Youko-chan let out an excited voice. However,

"Because Ajisai-san is always kind to me, I like her the most..."

"Satsuki-san teaches me, and being with her feels comfortable, so I like her the most..."

"Ah..."

"Kaho-chan, even though she's not my kano-pi, is the person I can talk to most naturally, so I like her the most..."

After hearing all of this, Youko-chan shook her head.

"Enough with that."

I knew it!

But it's only natural to think that each person has something about them that's the best, right!? Isn't that just how relationships work for everyone?

Huh...? Wait, isn't it kind of awful that I'm talking about my girlfriends, Mai and Ajisai-san, on the same level as my friends, Satsuki-san and Kaho-chan...?

No, but... a lover and a friend are just different labels, and that doesn't change how important they are… It's not like I think a lover is just an upgraded version of a friend or anything… But unlike friends, you can't have a bunch of lovers at once—it's a relationship with a lot of commitment...

Maybe the fact that I can't pick just one means I'm just indecisive after all...

Just as I was about to start feeling down, the attack continued.

"Like, saying 'I love everyone the most' kinda makes it sound like it doesn’t matter who it is, doesn’t it?"

"Is that... how it seems...?"

I truly mean it when I say that each and every one of them is important to me...

"I mean, I dunno. But could it be that as long as someone’s nice to you, you’d fall for just about anyone?

That felt like an awful thing to say!

"No, come on! I seriously treasure those four!"

"Reaaally~?"

Youko-chan leans in, peering into my face.

Too close, too close. Her cute little eyes are way too close.

Then, she grins mischievously.

"Then… does that mean I’d be okay too?"

"…Huh!?"

I instinctively pull back.

"That’s, um!"

"Eeh~, you’re really gonna make me say it~?"
Youko-chan flashes a meaningful smile, just like Kaho-chan does.

"I also want to be Renako-kun's number one ♪"

She's just teasing me, right!? Right!?

I hook the shopping bags onto my elbow, using both hands to shield my face. But Youko-chan circles around and peeks into my face again. I turn my face away again... but she circles around once more! For some reason, we end up spinning in place.

No, this can't be serious, right? It can't be, right? I've already used up all my luck just by being liked by Mai and Ajisai-san!

But I've heard something before. It's the rule that people who are popular get even more popular!

In fact, there's an experiment using guppies, a type of fish.

In guppy society, attractiveness is determined clearly by the size and beauty of their dorsal fins. In the natural world, things like personality or compatibility hold no value; it's an overwhelmingly appearance-based society.

Imagine there's a somewhat unimpressive guppy, Rena-ppi.

Rena-ppi has weak dorsal and caudal fins. Its body is small, and its ability to find food is lacking. Naturally, it isn't popular.

However, when Rena-ppi is left alone with a female or put into a situation where she's forced to be 'popular' for some experiment, it's surprising how she ends up just as popular when thrown into a group of attractive guppies!

Things that are supported by many people tend to gather even more support. This is known in psychology as the "bandwagon effect."

Terrifying. The fact that the lacking Amaori Renako was simply thrown into the 'popularity spiral' because of her environment... This is just like the Emperor's New Clothes...!

I haven't done anything, yet I've continued to be adored endlessly. I started to mistake myself for someone who was loved without having to make any effort. And after everyone around me has gone, I'd arrogantly think, 'But I'm always loved unconditionally~ ☆' and leave behind words like, 'If I'm not popular, then society is wrong!' as I turn to dust in the Tokyo desert...

I hate that...

"Huh, why's your face turning pale?"

"Sorry, I was imagining a dark future..."

"Renako-kun, do you imagine a dark future whenever someone shows you affection?"

Being asked directly, I give a case-by-case answer.

No, wait. The thing is, Youko-chan doesn't even know that I'm popular.

I'm just a high school girl sitting at the back of the Quintet. According to the meteorological office, the probability of a popularity spiral occurring is zero percent!

cheerfully made a finger heart.

"Just kidding, kidding! I'm so happy, Youko-chan! Thank you so much☆"

"Is your mood like a trampoline or something?"

After sinking down, she saw me shoot up high, and Youko-chan tilted her head. Sorry, that was definitely my fault just now.

Youko-chan placed her hands on her hips, then let out a sigh.

"Your guard is tough, huh, Renako-kun? I thought I was at least a little cute, but now I'm losing confidence..."

"Eh, eh?"

"I'm not getting any attention at all, it's so lonely... it's sad... I feel down..."

As Youko-chan keeps glancing at me while saying that, my heart starts pounding. No, I'm definitely trying to pay attention... as a friend!

What should I say? How should I follow up? But if I get too deep into this, it feels like there might be a trap waiting for me!

While I'm fumbling around, Youko-chan stops walking.

"Ah, we're here, we're here. Thanks for carrying the bags for me!"

"Y-yes... you're welcome..."

Just as I said that, I realized.

This tower mansion is... The place where I dropped off Lucie-chan before.

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah, no. I was just thinking, you live in such a big building! It's so large, it looks like it could transform into a robot!"

"Hmm? Yeah."

I was ignored. I had just said something strange, that's all. Well, it's the usual thing.

"Well, it’s not my place, but rather a place where an acquaintance lives."

"I-I see."

Could that acquaintance be... well, that's probably a rather simplistic thought. After all, this is such a huge building. It seems like around 2 million people might live here.

"...Renako-sama?"

Right. There must be about 2 million people in the world who know someone with such a voice...

Huh?

When I turned around, there stood a silver-haired beautiful girl. A girl with such delicate, glass-like beauty may be one of a kind in the world.

The beautiful girl lightly pushed off the ground and started running toward me. Then, with that same momentum, she threw herself into my arms.

"Renako-sama–!"

"Guh!"

Seeing that, Youko-chan stared in astonishment, her mouth slightly open.

"…Huh? No way, a fifth person??"

Before I could grasp what those words meant, Lucie-chan tackled me and subjected me to relentless petting for a while.

"Fufu, Renako-sama. Welcome."

"Ah, um. Excuse me for intruding..."
And so, for some reason, I found myself invited to Lucie-chan's home. Why...?

Still sitting at the dining table, I glanced around restlessly.

Lucie-chan's room, located on the upper floors of the tower apartment, had very few belongings. It was a room with little sense of lived-in comfort.

Lucie-chan is sitting next to me, smiling brightly. She's so cute.

She looked like a cousin visiting her aunt, so affectionate... cute, but still!

"...I never would have guessed that Renako-kun and Lucie-san knew each other."

Youko-chan moved the contents of the shopping bag she had placed on the kitchen counter into the fridge. She seemed very accustomed to it.

"Y-Yeah. We just happened to meet by chance."

"She's saved my life multiple times."

"That’s about the game, right!? The one we played together!"

Ahh, Youko-chan lets out a sound of understanding.

"And then, all of a sudden, you told me to go buy another game, right...?"

"Thanks, Youko."

"No, no~. It's part of the job~."

Youko-chan waves her hand playfully.

I timidly ask.

"Um, what kind of relationship do you two have?"

"Youko is someone who does anything for Lucie."

"What!?"

You mean, they're... a couple!?

Youko-chan quickly peeks out from the side of the refrigerator.

"Please don’t say it in a way that could be misunderstood! I don’t do everything! It’s more like a master and maid relationship!"

"My friend is a JK maid...?"

"Ah, geez. What I mean is, um, I’m helping out with Lucie’s daily needs, as asked by her mom."

"I-I see."

Indeed, Lucie-chan doesn’t seem to have much life skills.

"So, you mean that taking care of the pet is...?"

"…That's roughly how it is."

"I see, a white, large Persian cat. She doesn’t seem too spoiled… but... hmm, maybe she is...? The fact that you bought a game console and begged me to play with it, well, I was definitely happy about it, but it might indeed fall into the category of being spoiled."

"She didn’t even have curtains or a refrigerator until I started helping out..."

"It’s no longer dazzling. The curtains are amazing."

"That's true"

Now that you mention it, curtains are amazing. Without them, sunlight would pour in freely, and I’d end up waking up at dawn every day—what a hassle. I couldn’t help but feel grateful for the curtains again.

"Even in autumn, you can still get sunburned, you know. If I don't take proper care, my salary will drop, so i make sure to do it right."

Even though it was a favor from an acquaintance, she's getting paid. It feels like a really proper employment contract.

"But, Youko, you don’t play games with me."

"That’s outside the contract~"

"Hmph"

Pouting, Lucie-chan then looked at me with an upward gaze.

"So, let’s play a game together, Renako-sama."

Her eyelashes fluttered upwards, sparkling beautifully. Wow, it's a beautiful girl's request... Who could turn down an invitation from such a stunning girl?

"No, Renako-kun will be leaving soon."

She was standing right next to me. Youko-chan crossed her arms and shook her head, her attitude stricter than usual.

Lucie-chan dropped her eyebrows in a very sad expression.

"Is that so...? Renako-sama..."

Her face looked like someone had just stolen the strawberry from her favorite shortcake.

"Uh, well, if it's just a little..."

"You’re super busy today, right!? Renako-kun!"

Is she telling me to leave!?

Well, I'm not the kind of shameless woman who would overstay my welcome at someone else's house if I'm not being welcomed... so, I'll be leaving now...

Come to think of it, Youko-chan had been rejecting me during the shopping trip too. Maybe she just wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone. If that’s the case, I’ve done something rude.

"Is that so....."

Lucie-chan makes a face as if she dropped the three-tiered ice cream she just bought without even taking a bite. Ugh, my heart hurts...!

"Well..."

I looked at Youko-chan, wondering if just a little would be okay... and she calmly made an "X" with her fingers.

"Please don't spoil her. I understand that she’s very attractive, and I also know that Renako-kun is weak to beautiful women..."

"Isn't that a bit of an insult?"

"This person gets carried away as soon as you give them food. They'll even follow you all the way home."

"Really!?"

Lucie-chan, who had been lazily lying on the table, straightened her back and sat up, her hair flowing gently.

"You don’t have to worry about what Youko says. The 'master' is Lucie!"

"The employer is not Lucie-san."

"That’s not it..."

With the expression of someone who only got the minimum guarantee after using up all their limited stones for a gacha pull, Lucie-chan looks down sadly.

"I request a change in the contract... Lucie wants to play games with Youko too. I want to play. Let's play!"

Lucie-chan swings her arms and throws a tantrum. Ugh, she's just too cute... It's because her face is so pretty... Wait, this is exactly what Youko-chan pointed out!

"By the way, with shopping, cleaning, and laundry to do, plus taking care of you... where would there be time to play games?"

Lucie-chan places a finger on her chin, just like a child imitating an adult’s deductive thinking.

"Is food necessary?"

"It is necessary for humans! You’re so picky, you don’t like this or that!"

"Lucie can be fine with just three meals of Pocky. I’ll get full."

"Do you really want to fire me that badly!? Huh!?"

Youko-chan, still smiling, raised her voice—but it was clear that she was completely at Lucie-chan’s mercy.

"What are you laughing at, Renako-kun?"

"Huh?"

With a half-lidded stare, she cornered me, and I quickly waved both hands.

"Ah, no, I just thought, 'So Youko-chan can be like this too.' "

"…Like what, exactly?"

Youko-chan asks with a puzzled expression.

"I wonder what it is. It's just that usually, you're always keeping to your own pace, like you seem to have it all together. Not in a bad way! It's just a little... refreshing."

"Ugh..."

For some reason, Youko-chan looks shocked and turns away. Then, she turns back with a smile, as if playing peek-a-boo

"Th-that's not true~! I’m always Terusawa Youko, 24/7~!"

"I know that, but!"

"Let me just take a deep breath for now!"

"Y-Yeah. Go ahead."

Youko-chan’s deep breath form was graceful and beautiful.

Youko-chan gives a thumbs-up. Right after that, a surprised sound, "Ah!" was heard.

Lucie-chan, who had been walking quickly (probably to secretly grab a game console to play with me), tripped over nothing and fell with a thud. In the process, she knocked over the laundry basket, spilling everything.

A lot of cloth flew through the air.

"Phew..."

Lucie-chan stands up, still wearing shirt, underwear, and who knows what else, as if nothing happened.

"It’s safe."

Thanks to the cloth acting as a cushion, it seems Lucie-chan wasn’t injured.

Furthermore, the handheld game console she held up in both hands was also unharmed—however.

"Lucie-san!"

"Ugh..."

Youko-chan sprouts devil horns and looms over Lucie-chan.

"I told you so many times not to walk while playing games, didn't I!? No matter how many times I said it, you wouldn’t listen, we made a promise, didn’t we!?And now, look at the laundry I just folded—it’s a total mess!"

Lucie-chan tightly closes her eyes and covers her ears with both hands.

"Ah, you! The moment things get inconvenient, you pull this stunt! Who do you think would be in trouble if you get hurt, huh? It'd be you, Lucie-san, wouldn't it!? You wouldn't be able to work anymore, you know!"

"I'll be careful next time."

"You ignored me again and again and again, so that's it. Just like we agreed, I'm confiscating your game console."

"No..."

"Come on, let go! Hey! No, games are forbidden!"

Lucie-san desperately shakes her head, clutching the game console to her chest. Youko-chan tries to pry it from her hands. She suddenly realizes and turns to look at me.

"J-just kidding!"

"I think that's impossible!"

"Eh? What do you mean by 'impossible'? I don't quite get it. Even Napoleon said it. He said to respond to people who say something is impossible with, 'But I can do it, because you and I are different.'"

"That's Moomin!"

Actually, it was Little Mi. A near miss. But it doesn't matter!

"Why are you trying so hard to take it away!?"

"Because! Renako-kun likes those kinds of people who seem bright and outgoing, but also have a bit of a dark side, right!?"

"It's not that I like it! I do like it, though..."

Ugh, I can't completely deny it. But everyone likes those kinds of girls who are bright and popular in class, yet have a dark side that only you know about!

"Forget about whether I like it or not! Why are you trying to act like my type!?"

"I'm doing it to get closer to Renako-kun!"

“Why!? Do you like me!?!?”

“No, that’s not it!”

As we were arguing like that, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucie-chan preparing a drink for me.

I have a bad feeling about this!

"Ah, Lucie-chan—"

Lucie-chan's hands trembled slightly as she tried to pour the 1-liter carton of milk into a glass.

The milk slipped from Lucie-chan's hand.

"Ah."

With the sound of 'Splash!' everything around us turned completely white. I was covered in milk... and so was Youko-chan.

Whether it was a blessing from God or protection from angels, not a drop of milk splashed on Lucie-chan. Lucie-chan looked at me, with milk dripping from my bangs, and gave a small smile.

"Hehehe. Renako-sama, you’ve had quite a feast."

And then.

Ah, this is bad.

"〇×Δ〇□×〇Δ□"

Youko-chan exploded like a volcano.

* * *　* * *

She almost lost it.

"Y-you... You've gotta be kidding meeee! What the hell is this?! Why do you do everything I tell you not to dooo...?! If this wasn't work, I'd hit you—I'd definitely hit you! I would have hit you already! I definitely would have hit you!"

No, she had already lost it.

The shampoo bottle in Terusawa Youko’s grip was crushed, with about half of its contents spilled out.

"Y-Youko-chan…?"

A trembling voice, like a Chihuahua’s, came from nearby, snapping her back to reality.

Youko raises the corners of her mouth into a smile. It had become almost like a conditioned reflex.

"J-just kidding!"

"That's even scarier!"

Looks like it was no good.

This is the apartment's bathroom.

Drenched in milk from head to toe and transformed into milk-covered humans, Youko and Renako decided to take a shower. The two of them squeezed into the moderately small unit bath of the apartment, pressing close to each other. Since all their clothes were in the laundry, naturally, both of them were completely naked.

(Her chest is really big...)

Naturally, my eyes are drawn to that.

If the person she was dating were a guy, it'd be easy to assume she used her looks to seduce him. But all of Renako's partners are women.

I wonder. Do most women in the world actually like big breasts? At least, Youko has never heard of it. (As for Youko's own preferences, she probably likes them. They seem like they'd feel nice to touch. Though she's never looked at Renako that way.)

Anyway.

"Let's take a deep breath for now! Okay, deep breath!"

"Y-yes."

Youko has a routine she values for shifting her mood. It's deep breathing. She tends to get hot-headed quickly, so it's really useful for that reason too.

Terusawa Youko is a detective, an executive, and the heir to the private investigation agency 'Pikaris.' In terms of status, she might be similar to Oozuka Mai, the heir to Queen Rose, except for the fact that Youko is poor. Pikaris has a lot of debt. It's the debt her father accumulated from

his business failure. Because of that, she ended up working like this right after entering middle school.

She doesn't do this because she enjoys it, but fortunately, she seems to have a talent for it. Youko has handled countless jobs so far: finding lost cats, infidelity investigations, background checks, finding lost cats, resignation assistance, finding lost cats, finding lost cats...

From legal tasks to borderline illegal activities—it might be more accurate to call her a jack-of-all-trades. In this day and age, there's no room to be picky about work.

She's not like her father, who worked based on his whims. Pride is nothing but a hindrance. Thanks to that, she's finally reached the halfway point in paying off the debt.

Just a little more.

If she can successfully complete the job she's taken on from Queen Rose, Youko will finally be free.

Once she's paid off all the debt, she'll cut ties with her father without hesitation. That's Youko's current dream and the moment she's been waiting for most in her life

To make that happen, she absolutely must succeed in Operation 'Elvira's Advice.'

In other words, the naked woman in front of her.

"U-um… Actually, isn't it a bit too much for two people to be in here at the same time…?"

This woman, who's already dating four people, is now blushing while touching another woman's skin. This is all part of the plan to punish Amaori Renako.

(Seriously, isn't that way too lacking in self-restraint? Self-restraint...!)

This is bad. I'm about to lose my temper again.

Youko quietly took a deep breath.

Even with that many beautiful girls around her, does this woman still plan to expand her reach? She’s too much of a playgirl. Is she trying to surpass Don Giovanni, who had relationships with 2,000 women across various countries?

No, it's fine. That’s just how it is.

After all, Youko’s goal is to make Renako and Mai break up. The quickest way to do that is to catch evidence of Renako cheating.

Whether a woman who’s already dating four people can be considered cheating for getting involved with a fifth person is a bit of an ethical gray area, though…

What’s even more puzzling is…

"Actually, I’ll wait outside… You can go in first, Youko-chan…"

Even when Youko tries to make a move, Renako smoothly pulls away.

(Does that mean I’m not attractive!?)

This is unforgivable. Even if it doesn’t seem like it, I’ve done honey trap-like things before. I have some confidence in my looks. Sure, the quintet from Class 1-A is a group of stunningly beautiful girls, but I’m not bad myself!

I don’t take pride in my work, but as a high school girl, I have a decent amount of pride. Otherwise, all the daily beauty exercises and skincare I never skip would be completely pointless. It’s such a hassle, though!

I got sidetracked. Once I get fired up, the flames spread rapidly, one after another. This is one part of my personality I think I need to fix.

"Come on, come on, it's fine, it's fine. Let’s just shampoo for now. Your hair’s completely soaked anyway."

Even if it’s a bit forceful, I grab Renako’s arm to stop her and say with a smile

"Ugh... Do I really not have the right to say no…?"

“Nope~☆”

I say decisively with a smile.

(After all, this is a golden opportunity.)

Lucie Lefebvre is the kind of person who constantly throws tantrums, to the point that Youko has already given up pretending to be nice around her. She’s seriously the worst, always causing problems one after another. It’s like she took whatever fragments of common sense she had, shattered them into dust, threw them in a blender, and scattered them over the Grand Canyon—she’s just that much of a reckless baby knight. But for once… I have to admit, that was a nice assist.

The voice recorder has already been set up.

(If I can make Renako-kun cheat here, then the mission is complete. I'll finally be free, pay off my debt, and graduate from being Lucie-san's caretaker.)

There had been many twists and turns.

To fulfill Oozuka René’s request, I first thoroughly investigated everything about Amaori Renako. I scrutinized her actions and personal life in detail, and even uncovered the hidden secrets of her middle

school days. Given how much I've done this before, background investigations are second nature to me.

Now, I'm confident that I know more about Amaori Renako than anyone else in the world.

(The other day, I used one of those and tried shaking up Amaori Renako, and it was amusing how easily I could make her waver. When people share secrets, their sense of distance tends to shrink easily.)

After that, Koto Satsuki joined as an ally. However, it was a trap.

Satsuki did not approve of direct action. Even though it was supposed to be an easy job—just make the target make a move, get proof of the cheating, and use it as blackmail—she tried to proceed cautiously.

Meanwhile, René called Lucie over from France. By making Mai and Lucie get married, they are trying to make Renako break up (indirectly). For now, Satsuki also seems to have gone along with René's proposal.

This is bad.

I was the one who took on this request. At this rate, my success fee will be deducted. Taking care of Lucie, which was forced onto me, isn't bad financially, but... the stress on my end is way too much!

(As for Koto-san, I can deal with that later. I don't know if it's because she's weak from being in love or something, but... because she doesn't want me to make a move on her or whatever? It must be some trivial reason like that. I don't care, okay?)

I don't want to be dragged into this messy four-timing drama. Mine is just a job.

That's why.

"Hey, Renako-kun, it’s shampoo time! Don’t open your eyes, okay?"

This is all just work too.

She roughly lathers up Renako’s hair.

Unlike the rough handling I usually give Lucie, this time, I take the utmost care…

(Look, I’ll make your face melt with relaxation…)

Intertwining all ten fingers, as if polishing each strand of hair to perfection.

In the past, I lied about my age and qualifications to work part-time as a salon assistant. That experience is coming in handy now. (Back then, it was part of an investigation into a hairstylist’s infidelity.)

Renako lets out a "Uuuuu...". It feels good.

"We’re just getting started! ☆"

She rinses out the shampoo, then applies the treatment in the same way.

While I was picking up the body soap, a 'no' came flying at me.

"N-No, it's fine! I’ll do that part myself!"

"It's okay,You don’t need to hesitate"

"No, it’s not like that! Umm! Uh! The thing is, I’m super ticklish with other people's hands! It’s impossible!"

At her panicked voice, I couldn’t help but smirk. No, no, it’s not like that. This is work, work.

But, in my mind, the quintet members come to mind. They're at the top of the school social hierarchy, overflowing with charm as girls. As a fellow high school girl, I'm always made to feel a sense of defeat by them.

Even if I provoked Takada Himiko, their loyalty didn't waver at all. They act as if 'real friendship' exists in this world.

If there's any truth in what I told Renako, it's that I was a loner who couldn't make many friends.

No, I don't need friends. Because even if I made friends, it wouldn't bring me any profit. If I have to be forced into trivial daily conversations, I'd rather be looking at the flyers for a supermarket sale. That's much more useful.

This is not a bitter excuse or anything.

In reality, after starting to work at a private investigation agency and realizing the ugliness of humans to the point of hating it, I really don't care about class relationships or anything like that. I mean, trying to gain popularity is just about repeating a set pattern, anyone can do that!

While I'm working hard, carrying debt, and mentally exhausting myself, I get angry at those people who are just playing at being friends. It's completely just venting my frustration. I know that, even myself.

Even though I watch videos and thoroughly research good-reputed affordable cosmetics before buying them, those guys are probably just buying high-brand cosmetics without much thought. In the first place, the quality is different. It's obvious that their visuals are bound to be enhanced. It's frustrating!

I've started to feel like I want to kill everyone who has no sense of judgment in this world. It's an emotion that comes regularly. Right now, I decided to take that feeling and direct it towards the woman in front of

me—the beautiful women, the so-called beauties, who's already dating four people, and throw it at her.

"I can’t help it, Renako-kun, you know. Well then, how about things like this?"

I slathered body soap on my body, and then I hugged Renako’s back.

"Eek!? Uh, um, ahhh, um, Youko-chan!?"

"What is it~?"

"Isn’t this a bit beyond the scope of friendship!?"

"But, you get ticklish when washed with hands, right?"

"I did say that, but i didn’t say anything else was fine, right!?"

While pressing my chest against her back, slippery, I whispered near her ear.

"But, doesn’t this feel good?"

"——!"
Renako’s movements freeze. Her ear, seen from behind, was bright red.

Cheating and lying are also things humans do. Eh, someone who seems like they’re doing things properly would do something like this!? I’ve long since lost the naïve sensitivity that would make me surprised by such things.

It’s common that appearance and substance are completely different. The most representative person of this is probably Amaori Renako.

With this face, who could believe she has the guts to 4-time? And all of them, being from the same group of friends. It’s not a sane act.

Is their hobby to pour gasoline on themselves and smoke a cigarette?

(Despite that… she reacts as if she has no experience. Eh... she uses such methods? Despite living a hedonistic lifestyle every day...)

Alternatively, if I change my way of thinking, it might be proof that I have the charm of a beautiful girl, to the extent that even a woman living a hedonistic lifestyle becomes stiff.

Fufufu. Well, if I put it bluntly, I'm an outsider of the group. Because I'm an outsider, I guess I was desperately holding back and not making a move.

I couldn't help but smirk.

And then, unavoidably, I start to get excited. I can almost see the image of Koto Satsuki biting a white handkerchief.

I wrap both arms around Renako's neck. I press my body tightly against hers.

"Terusawa Youko-san!?"

"Yes~♡"

"No, not 'yes'!? But this! It's like, come on! Hey!?"

I can see Renako's white nape.

The flesh of a woman indulging in 4-timing. The source of all evil. The cause of my struggles to this extent.

If I cannot kill her here now...

"Bite."

"Eek!?"

Youko bared her teeth to Renako’s neck.

I see, this kind of taste.

I adjust it and shape the teeth.

"Aah, aah, aah, aah!"

Renako, unable to twist her body, just froze and screamed.

I quickly release my mouth, and the tooth shape is complete, like a model.

(Wow... like, isn’t this good?)
This is what I call the living embodiment of infidelity.

Somehow, it feels a little too raw, and even Youko starts feeling embarrassed.

Because it’s embarrassing, that makes it even more exciting.

"Wait!? Um! I was just thinking of getting out now!"

"Not yet~"

Chomp.

"Hnn!"

This time, the opposite side of the neck.

Alright, a nice clean mark.

It feels like I've claimed her as mine. Are you watching, Koto Satsuki? Your beloved Amaori Renako—I've bitten her. Yay~

"A-Ah, please… forgive me…"

Ignoring that.

"Aah~"

Opening my mouth, this time for her upper arm.

A clearly marked crescent moon. I want to make sure it never fades.

"Kyuu…"

(This person's voice is so cute…)

As she lowered her gaze, biting her lips to endure, I caught a glimpse of Renako's profile.

Even though I'm the one making the moves, for some reason, my heart is racing.

As expected of the succubus who corrupted four people. I didn't think I was letting my guard down, but when I interact with her like this, she just seems like a normal person, and I almost forget what she really is.

(Well, I'm just going to finish this all at once~☆)

I don't have that kind of experience, but it'll probably be fine. Things will work out somehow.

"Hyaa…!"

Licking the bite mark with her tongue, Youko wraps her arms around from the front.

"Ah, w-wait…!"
Renako’s hand is gently placed on my wrist.

She turns back over her shoulder.

"M-Maybe we should get out now…? Okay…?"
A trembling voice. Moist eyes.

"Youko-chan…"

That face, as if she were begging, sent an involuntary shiver through Youko.

Once again, the anger deep in my heart—my sadistic impulse—is provoked.

"Something like that..."
(Of course, that’s a no—)

Renako shuddered at the cheerful smile.

With a face that said, "I can't take this anymore," she slipped through Youko’s arms.

"Ah! Hey!"

She tries to leave the unit bath just like that.

"It’s over already!"

Somehow, she grabs her waist and locks her in a tight hold.

"H-Hey! Don’t run away!"

"What is this already!? This is going beyond the bounds of friendship, right!? What are you planning to do with me!?"

"It’s just skinship! I just want to get closer to you, Renako-kun!"

"If that’s the case, let’s just talk about games and manga more! This kind of thing is just not okay! It’s way too lewd!"

"Even though you love this kind of thing! You love girls, don’t you!? Don't you!?"

"That's not true! I don't like them at all! Not even a little!! I've denied it over and over and over and over and over and over again!! I have!!"

Renako’s shout echoes through the room.

Then—BANG!—the bathroom door swung open.

Damn it. Did Lucie come to check on us? How far is she going to keep interfering!?

Still clinging to Renako’s waist, Youko tried to string together some random excuse to shoo Lucie away.

"Huh?"

Swaying gently in front of her were the tips of long black hair.

She lifted her face. A woman stood there with her arms crossed.

"Could you two cut it out with the exaggerations already?"

Renako cried out, "Ueh!?"

Youko’s business partner. Koto Satsuki stood there, wearing an annoyed expression.

"Oops..."

* * * * * *

Why...?

I was sitting in seiza on a chair.

Beside me was Youko-chan.

Across from me was Lucie-chan.

And the one sitting diagonally across from me was...

"Um... this is a misunderstanding...?"

"Hmm."

Satsuki-san, looking completely uninterested, lowered her gaze to her phone. I was wearing a slightly oversized T-shirt I had borrowed from Lucie-chan.

For some reason, taking this whole situation into account, I felt like I had been backed into a corner.

Youko-chan's prank had gone too far, and... More importantly, why is Satsuki-san even here in Lucie-chan’s house...? Is this person just... everywhere?

"Not that I really care, but..."
Satsuki-san, raising her finger, pointed at my neck.

"That. Wouldn’t it be better to make sure other people don’t misunderstand?"

"That’s not it!"

I instinctively covered the bite mark with my hand and shouted.

"It’s Youko-chan’s fault!? This kind of prank!"

"A prank."

"Yes, it was! Youko-chan was washing my body, and just when I thought that, she suddenly—she bit me! No, that’s not it!?"

That was close!

I almost fell for a trap question!

"We were just taking a shower together! There was nothing indecent about it!"

"Oh really. The act of deliberately showering together in a cramped unit bath is totally not indecent, huh?"

"Yes, that’s right, absolutely... No, that’s not it!?!?"

This person… had laid out layers upon layers of traps!? Such a… strategist…!

"To begin with, Lucie-chan spilled the milk everywhere, and then…"

"I have no excuse."
For some reason, Lucie-chan bowed her head in an old-fashioned tone.

"But… the voices coming from the bathroom sounded so cheerful and fun… Lucie ended up feeling a little jealous."

Lucie-chan placed a hand on her cheek and, for some reason, muttered with a slightly embarrassed look.

"Youko-chan looked like she was having fun, though!"

I shamelessly shifted the blame onto the girl sitting next to me. I'm not shifting the blame! She's the root cause of everything!

In modern-day Japan, even girls flipping each other's skirts or touching in the changing room is normally not okay, right? That kind of moral awareness has been spreading, and yet… Your sense of ethics is completely broken, Youko-chan… You're terrifying…

The person in question, Youko-chan, is pouting with a dissatisfied expression.

"Eh? It's just some 'skinship' between friends, right?"

"And then, do you bite people?"

I look at my two arms. Ueh. They're really marked clearly...

"Koto-san, you really can't read the atmosphere."

Satsuki-san's temple twitches.

"If you wanted to be included, you should've just said so honestly."

Lucie-chan raised her hand firmly and said,
"I wanted to be included!"

Youko-chan ignored that and glanced at Satsuki-san with half-open eyes.

"It's like that, right? Koto-san, whenever Renako-kun and I are talking, you always interrupt us. What is it? Do you want attention?"

"The point is, don't do that in someone's line of sight. If the table in a restaurant is dirty, you'd want to complain about it."

"Koto-san, you really aren't honest, huh? With that attitude, you won't be able to get a lover, you know?"

Hey, what are you saying to Satsuki-san!?

If you say something like that, you'll get a low kick!? Youko-chan!

While I'm feeling nervous on my own, Satsuki-san acts nonchalantly.

"I see."
She only answered

Huh...? Satsuki-san, aren't you going to do a low kick? I wonder what happened. I wonder if she sprained her leg. I end up worrying about her, actually. When it comes to Satsuki-san's three major traits—black hair, beauty, and low kick—...

Maybe low kicks and grabbing someone's face aren't something she does with just anyone. Lately, Satsuki-san has become such a violent heroine that I might have misunderstood, and maybe that was a sign of affection...? If that's the case, Satsuki-san, your way of expressing love is way too violent...!

"Ahh… It was so close this time... just a little more..."
Youko-chan sighs deeply.

What was just a little more... Was it that I was going to be eaten up...?

The conversation was interrupted for a moment because Satsuki didn't respond. So, during that moment, I hesitantly try opening my mouth.

"I mean, why is Satsuki-san here?"

The one who answered was Lucie-chan.
"Satsuki came to hang out because she's Lucie's meilleure amie (best friend)."

Mei... What?

When I was confused by the words I couldn’t catch, Lucie-chan wrapped her arms around Satsuki-san, who was sitting beside her sympathetically.

With a full smile, she gives a kiss on that cheek.

Eh!?

W-What!?

Satsuki-san is accepting the kiss on her cheek without rejecting it.

A small sigh.

"Honestly... In Japan, you don’t just kiss anyone, Lucie."

"This is Lucie’s house. It’s special jurisdiction."

This time, Lucie-chan faces her own cheek towards Satsuki-san.

"Look, Lucie is waiting."

"Okay, okay."

WOW

Satsuki-san pressed her cheek against Lucie-chan's cheek and made a light kissing sound. She repeated it twice, once on each side!

Hawawawawawawa...

"Fufufu"

"Are you satisfied now, princess?"

Lucie-chan held her cheek with both hands and squinted her eyes happily.

"Yes. I'm glad I came to Japan."

After that, she smiled at me as well.

"I've also made friends."

"Uh, yeah..."

I can't process the exchange happening in front of me, it's like something from a Western movie.

Huh? What on earth is their relationship...?

My surprised voice echoes through the residential area.

"Is Lucie-chan Mai's fiancée!?"

In the evening, I was walking home, wearing the finally dried clothes, with Satsuki-san, as her part-time job time was approaching.

I ended up hearing the shocking fact.

It's much stranger that there are so many people as beautiful as her in the world…

"Ah, so that means Satsuki-san's old acquaintance, right?"

"That's right."

"Could it be that Satsuki-san was the one who said 'Kisses are usually on the cheek' before?"

"You don't need to remember unnecessary things."

Satsuki-san casually throws that out.

Did this person just say that the memory of my first kiss with her is 'unnecessary'?

"I suppose she'll be working in Japan for a while. Even so, I'm worried, so I sometimes go check on her."

"You're kind."

"You must have talked to her a few times. If that's the case, you understand, right?"

In my head, the images of Lucie-chan, who had collapsed, Lucie-chan, who had been quietly waiting for me on the horse, and Lucie-chan spilling the milk, all appeared one after another.

"Well… It's natural to worry, right?"

"That's how it is. Don't misunderstand it as kindness."

It was a tone that didn't allow any argument.

Still, I think Satsuki-san is kind… Well, there's no need to forcefully impose words the person doesn't want to hear.

"That's because, for Mai and me, she's like a younger sister."

"Ah."

Somehow, it feels right.

Satsuki-san’s attitude was more like being close to family than something you would do with friends or lovers.

…A younger sister, huh?

"Does Satsuki-san understand about Lucie-chan?"

"What does that mean?"

"Ah, no, well... it's a kind of story about whether I can understand it or not."

"Well, probably… mostly? That girl looks simple at first glance."

That might be true.

Joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness. All emotions come across directly, even though she doesn’t have a rich expression. That might be the expressiveness of a famous model.

Satsuki-san easily touches upon my true feelings, which she had been holding without saying directly.

"Don’t you understand about your younger sister?"

"Eh… well, I mean…"

I look away.

"But honestly, I don’t really understand anyone’s feelings. I just thought… at the very least, I should understand my sister. But in the end,

I failed at that too."

Before I knew it, everything had already ended while I was caught up in all the chaos.

It'll probably always be this way.

I move too slowly, and my sister always ends up leaving me behind. It’s completely reversed from when we were kids.

"I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing, though."

"I wonder if that's really the case... For example, Mai has never once in her entire life understood my feelings, but I don’t particularly mind."

"Mai is forgiven for that, isn’t she!?"

"That’s true. One way or another, she tries to come closer. The fact that she makes an effort to understand properly gets across."

Satsuki-san chuckled softly.

"In reality, whether or not it actually helped is just a result. Having someone around who reaches out to help is a very fortunate situation for the person involved."

"Um… are you encouraging me?"
When I looked up at her, Satsuki-san slightly narrowed her eyes.

"For example, something like this. Just now, I said something cliché and ordinary, like what you'd find in any self-help book, but…"

"The way you said that…!"

"But if your feelings even lightened just a little, then that means it had some meaning, right? Even if nothing was actually done."

I wonder… is that really true…? I know that what Satsuki-san says is right in almost every situation, but…

"Is it selfish… to wish for more than this?"

"That's right. The help someone can give at a given time depends on timing and their own mood. Anything more than that is just forcing it. It won’t end well."

Satsuki-san declared firmly. She sounded like she was saying something that could go viral on X (formerly Twitter).

Without thinking, I ended up complaining to Satsuki-san. I quietly reflected on it in my heart and lowered my head slightly.

"…Thank you. I’ll remember that."

"That's why even I don't interfere in Mai and Lucie's fiancé issue. I just check on Lucie from time to time, and that's it, right?"

"Well… yeah, that's true…"

"…Huh? But Satsuki-san, when Mai asked you on the rooftop, 'Did you meet Lucie-chan?' I think you answered 'no'…"

Maybe… this is something I shouldn't have said too.

Satsuki-san didn't change her expression at all.

"That's right. That was a lie."

How bold!

"W-Why?"

Satsuki-san elegantly brushed her hair aside as she spoke.

"If I feel like something is going to turn into a hassle, I just lie without any particular reason. That's the kind of person I am."

"Aren't you saying something terrible!?"

"Isn't that just human nature?"

"That might be true, but still!"

However, recent research has shown that animals also tell lies. Not just through camouflage or mimicry. Monkeys and crows are well-known examples. Social animals have the ability to lie. In other words, Satsuki-san’s statement should be "Isn't that social behavior?" instead of "Isn't that human nature?"

Well, not that it really matters!

"But if you lie, you have to keep remembering the lie forever… In the end, I feel like it's just not worth it…"

I’m probably the last person who should be saying this, considering how I keep covering up my past.

"It’s fine. I’m smart, after all."

"Oh… If that’s the case, then I guess it’s fine…? Maybe…?"

I don’t know. But I can’t change the way Satsuki-san lives. Because it’s not like I’m her life partner or anything.

"Don’t worry. I’ll keep the thing with Terusawa a secret for you."

"Nguh!"
I almost bit my tongue.

I unintentionally held my neck while looking at Satsuki-san.

"It’s not like that, really… that was something Youko-chan did unilaterally…"

"That’s why I said I would keep it a secret for you."

"Something feels unsettling! It's like after that, it adds 'So listen to what I say'!"

Satsuki-san furrowed her brow.

"It’s paranoia. It’s hallucinations caused by your guilty feelings."

"Well, that’s exactly it!"

If I give in to this guilt, I’ll end up calling Mai and Ajisai-san and confessing, "I was bitten on the neck while taking a shower with my friend…"

No one can be happy; it’s the bad end route caused by my weakness.

Bad end 73: [The end of the fickle woman]... So many bad ends!

Well, as long as Satsuki-san stays quiet, Lucie-chan won’t know about what happened in the bath, and Youko-chan probably won’t tell anyone... Probably.

I ended up in an unexpected bad situation, but... the heavy feeling I had when going out is gone. Maybe I was too nervous to even feel down.

I rubbed my neck.
"Sigh… Even if it was just a joke, wasn’t that going too far…? Was Youko-chan feeling stressed…?"

She seemed uncomfortable with Lucie-chan.

If you keep getting dragged around for work, you'd want to let loose sometimes too, I guess.

The place where I got bitten… still kind of stings… It hurt quite a bit… I don’t think I’ll be able to forget it anytime soon.

"Well, at the very least, be careful with Terusawa."

"Haha… Yeah, you're right."

At the very least, I should avoid taking a shower together again. That kind of playful giggling and messing around might be normal for high school girls, but for me, it's just too much…

We arrived at the fork in the road. This is where I part ways with Satsuki-san. However, just as she was leaving, Satsuki-san dropped a bombshell.

"That person is after you."

That means…

The moment I understood what she meant, my cheeks suddenly grew hot.

"Huh!?"

* * *

"I'm off!"

Early in the morning, my little sister’s voice echoes.

Leaving the house at the same time as before, my little sister seems to

have completely gotten back to normal. My family, too, goes about their days as if no one even remembers that my sister once stopped going to school.

It's the same for me, too.

I decided to lock the class reunion invitation away in my desk drawer... Other than that, life goes on as usual. Plans with everyone in Quintet didn’t line up easily, though. But for the most part, I was satisfied with my current days.

Even while hoping for a big change, I feel relieved by my unchanging daily life. Humans really are greedy creatures.

"I'm home!"

Before dinner, my little sister comes home.

As I lay on the living room sofa, lazily lounging around, she looks down at me with eyes that seem to say, "Seriously, this person..."

"Big sis, what about your homework?"

"Today, I only have ones that I can finish quickly."

"Then you should just do it first."

"Yeah, that's true. That’s one way to look at it."

"Yeah, yeah. Mom, I'm so tired from club activities! I'm hungry! What's for dinner?"

The same, unchanged daily life as before my sister stopped going to school.

I really wanted to help my little sister as her big sister… but in the end, she recovered on her own—without relying on anyone. (Well, maybe with some support from everyone in Quintet…)

That's admirable. Even if she stumbles sometimes, she's still different from me.

But…

I was only focused on the things I could see. Because she acted like nothing was wrong, I convinced myself that it was already over.

At this point, the gears had long been broken.

The everyday life I had been seeing was nothing more than a cardboard building made five minutes ago. There might have been a great sacrifice behind it.

I had not known all along.

And then, on that day, on the way back from school,

I was ambushed for the second time.

* * *

S-She's here...

The person is, once again, Seira-san.

However, this time, she didn't appear near my house but in front of the station close to school.

While hiding behind a utility pole, I peek at the situation.

The middle school student standing in front of the station stands out because of her glamorous appearance. It looks like the stylish and glamorous streets of Harajuku are in the background.

Frightened by the pressure of 999 messages, I ended up blocking the contact without thinking… but did it backfire on me...?

I can’t believe she came all the way here…

No… maybe she isn’t here for me. Maybe she’s waiting for Kaho-chan… or perhaps our cosplay friend, Moon-san...

No, that’s not it. Somehow, her look is sharp... That’s the face of a hunter aiming for its prey.

That means, the monster to be hunted is, after all, me... Seira-san did say she would come again... Well then, how should I get through this...

A sudden stealth mission has begun.

If this were a game, I’d climb the walls like parkour and escape across the rooftops, but unfortunately, this is reality. I can’t even perform a ninja assassination. Games don’t help in life.

So, I could either go into a café to kill time or, while the Ashigaya students are still around, blend into the crowd and head toward the opposite ticket gate.

If i want to be sure, there’s also the option of taking one step back… but…

If I’m stalked every day starting today, I’ll end up walking a lot every day, and I’ll get really healthy… I might even lose weight…

While I was thinking such foolish things, a sudden revelation came to me.

Wait. Why is Seira-chan standing so proudly in front of the station like that?

After all, the other day when she was waiting in front of the Amaori family's house, she captured me, who was walking carefreely without a thought, so magnificently. Then this time too, she could have just hidden in front of the ticket gate, right?

My FPS brain is whispering to me.

In other words...

Suddenly leaving the spot, I looked around. Seira-chan over there is the decoy, and... The one who is supposed to capture me should be somewhere...

...Where is it? Where?

If there's no one here, it would mean that I'm just having a solo "chuunibyou" episode. It seems like my instincts were sharp. In the corner of my vision, I briefly saw a figure that looked like a middle school student, wearing a coat.

This is it!

I'm glad I played FPS. Games really do help in life...! I continue to be saved by games.

Sneakily breaking out of the encirclement, I relentlessly apologize in my mind.

I'm sorry, Seira-san. When things settle down, I'll bring a box of sweets to the cleaning shop... Please, let me protect my heart for now...

I guess this is what it feels like to be a criminal...
After walking for a short while.

My wrist was grabbed by someone.

"Huh?"

Immediately after, a clinking, rigid sound. It was the sound of handcuffs being attached to my wrist.

"...Huh!?"

I lift my face. Right before me was...

"I caught you."
It was Minato-san.

"Wh-Why!? Then, who was that figure earlier!?"

"I got help from a friend."

"No way..."

In my world, the only people who played the role of Haruna’s friends were Seira-san and Minato-san. But to think that other friends would appear...!

This isn't the world of a game; it's reality. There are 8 billion people in the world. What I learned in games isn't useful here after all...!

I try to pull away with all my strength, but my wrist is suddenly pulled. I realize. One side of the handcuffs is connected to Minato-san's wrist.

Oh no!.

"The thing when they take the suspect away...!"

"Well, the handcuffs themselves are toys, but I don't think you can break them that easily."

"Why go this far!?"

"I also have my own circumstances."

"It's a conflict of circumstances..."

"So, I arrested you. If you want me to remove them, please listen to what I say."

Minato-san lightly lifts his hand. The sound of the jangling handcuffs completely controls my free will.

Minato-san opens his smartphone and murmurs, "16:52, suspect secured..."

"Ugh, the right to remain silent and the right to call a lawyer..."

"You don’t have those rights."

"I can't believe this is a rule of law country...!"

A hand was placed lightly on my shoulder.

"I'm your court-appointed lawyer, you know!"

"!?"

I turn around, filled with hope.

"So, please behave, Onee-san senpai."

It was Seira-san.

"Aren't you a person on the police's side?!"

To think that a detective and a lawyer are in cahoots, it's all over now...

"Well, for now, shall we move to a different place?"

"Yeah, to some random cafe or something."

And so, I am sandwiched between two middle schoolers, being taken away. If any of my classmates saw me, it would instantly become a rumor-worthy scene.

What kind of judgment will be passed on me...? I really hope I can return to the outside world as soon as possible... from the bottom of my heart.

...But.

The story that was confessed to me by the two at the cafe was completely different from what I had imagined.

"Well then."

Coincidentally, the situation was very similar to when I set a trap for Seira-san with Kaho-chan the other day.

Last time, I had Seira-san sit at the far side of the table so she wouldn't escape, but this time it's the opposite.

Seira-san sat facing me, and Minato sat at my side, blocking the exit.

Since Minato and I are handcuffed together in the first place, there's absolutely no way to escape...

I see... When you do something bad to someone, it really does come back to you... Karma... It’s painful...

Everyone finished ordering without much thought. Now, my public shaming is about to begin…

Cold sweat wouldn’t stop. Is this how someone feels after being arrested? As though their future has been taken away.

"Um... I don’t have much money..."

I whimper in a faint voice.

They might ask for wages, compensation, or a settlement fee... But if I could pay with money, that would be better... Please, just don’t give me prison time... not prison time, please...

The detective and the lawyer exchange glances and nod at each other.

Then, it was the lawyer (Seira-san) who opened her mouth.

"Onee-san Senpai."

"Yes..."

The hardest three-way meeting of my life begins... Already, the corners of my eyes are burning.

Will I again, in front of the two of them, shamefully expose my crying face...?

Seirai-san lowered her head.

"I'm sorry."

...Huh?

"What exactly... Huh?"

I widened my eyes.

"Are you saying… 'From now on, I'm going to spread your personal information on social media. So, I'm apologizing in advance'…!?"

"No, that's not it!"

Seira-san pleads.

"The situation has changed. So, Onee-san Senpai… I need your help…"

As if tracing the outline of a switch that must not be touched, I ask.

"The situation…?"

It seems like… I won't be punished for running away from the two of them…?

Both of them have expressions that say, "This isn't the time for that."

"Then, were you really waiting in ambush because you wanted my help...?"

"Yeah."

Seira-san nods. I lightly lift one of my hands. Minato-san's arm comes along with it.

"These handcuffs…"

"This time, we couldn't afford to let you escape."

"Then, if you had just said so!"

"If I had told you, would you have trusted me? I was just waiting right in front of you, and as expected, you ran away, didn't you?"

"Ugh……"

Seira-san is completely right. I lower my head in apology.

"I'm sorry… I’m a woman who deserves to be restrained in handcuffs…"

"That’s right. But don’t worry. You can atone for your crimes. If you act now, it’s still not too late."

"Is that true…? Lawyer-san…?"

Minato-san whispers to Seira-san in a low voice.

"Seira, if you push too hard, she'll just end up crying again…"

"Hmm… Is now not a good time…?"

"Yeah. Save your personal grudge for after this is over."

"Got it."

Once this whole 'situation' is over, it seems like Seira-san will properly take out her personal grudge on me. This sucks. It would’ve been nice if we could’ve just gotten along… but that’s not how it turned out.

Even as I hung my head, I asked the two of them.

"But… Haruna has already gone to school, right? Then, doesn’t that mean all the problems are settled…?"

Besides that…

It's frustrating, but I have to say it out loud and admit it.

"Haruna doesn’t care about me at all… She acts like she was never skipping school… Even if something happens, I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help…"

"That’s not true."

Minato-san firmly declared.

"Because…"

"Minato."

Without responding to Seira-san calling her name, Minato-san turned to me, who was sitting beside her, and spoke.

"Haruna got angry because I talked about Onee-san."

"…Eh?"

That was something Haruna denied to me while laughing. She said that her situation had nothing to do with big sis at all.

"I’ll explain from the beginning."

Minato-san calmly began to talk to me, who was still confused.

"Let me confirm something first. My big sister, Nashiji Komachi, and Onee-san were former classmates, right?"

Just hearing that name makes my stomach feel heavy.

As if defeated by gravity, I nodded softly.
"Yeah."

"I see. I also heard it when I was talking with my big sister. She told me that Amaori-senpai didn’t go to school much at that time."

Seira-san stared at me, as if observing my expression.

I couldn’t think of an appropriate reaction, so I just smiled to lighten the atmosphere.

"It’s the truth. Probably, everything."

Seira-san was surprised.

"I see... Huh, even though you're friends with Oozuka Mai-san?"

"Well, I guess."

I gave a vague answer.

"By chance, Mai ended up sitting next to me at the entrance ceremony... and I was the first to speak to her. That’s all there is to it."

"Um... how much did you hear?"

Minato exchanged a glance with Seira for a moment.

"She was absent from school, and also, she was a student who didn’t stand out in middle school. That’s about it."

Is that also true? I was asked with their eyes, and I nodded.

Seira-san furrowed her brow.

"Then, on the contrary, why is Haruna being stubborn...?"

Minato-san continued.
"I told Haruna the things I heard. But then, Haruna suddenly started getting angry."

At that, Seira-san agreed.

"Haruna sometimes gets angry jokingly, but I was surprised because I had never seen her get so seriously upset before. But since she seemed to like Onee-san senpai quite a bit, I wondered if it was a sensitive topic."

I can't imagine Haruna getting angry about someone talking bad about me, and what Minato-san said was just the truth anyway...

"Haruna got so angry that I became stubborn... Things got a bit tangled. The class atmosphere kept getting worse... and I made Seira feel awkward, I'm sorry."

"No, not at all. Well, I did think you should have made up quickly though."

"I also... when my big sister was called a liar, I got upset and lost my temper..."

The way she said that, I suddenly became curious.

"Minato-san, um... are you close with your older sister?"

"Eh? No... I think it's normal, but... why?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing. Sorry, can you continue?"

"Yes."

Minato-san gave a small nod and then continued.

"While we were spending time in different groups, friends asked about the cause of the fight. When I honestly answered, then..."

At that point, Minato-san was at a loss for words.

Seira-san's eyes widened, and she exhaled forcefully.

"It was definitely Haruna's fault for suddenly snapping! I still think that way!"

Minato-san placed her hand on her cheek.

Ah... the story about Minato-san getting hit by my little sister.

Minato-san kept her gaze lowered.

"After that, Haruna stopped coming to school..."

"B-but..."

I ask the two of them, as if the incident is still ongoing.

"Since Haruna started going to school again, doesn't that mean you two made up?"

For a while, the two of them didn't say anything.

"...Is that not it?"

An awkward silence passed. About the time it takes for the second hand on the clock to make a full rotation,

Seira-san opened her mouth.

"...So, the situation has changed."

The conversation came back.

In other words, this is the current situation.

"Haruna won't try to talk to anyone."

Minato-san murmured quietly.

"Eh...?"

Beyond that, it was a story about Haruna that I didn't know.

"Eventually, no one touched Haruna anymore, and she became like a person who wasn't there in class. It seems like she's not going to club activities either…"

"Eh, wait."

But, every day, it was like that.

"I'm off!"
Early in the morning, in order to make it in time for morning practice...

With a smile on her face, as if nothing had changed, she would leave the house. And even when she came back, it was after it got dark…

… So, that was all a lie…?

In my mind, an image of Haruna appears.

Even during break time, Haruna just sits alone at her desk. She insists that she's fine, yet she spends her long, long days with nothing to do. My little sister, being crushed by peer pressure and loneliness.

Just like I once was.

"Why..."

The words slip out from deep in my throat, unintentionally.

"How did it end up like this…?"

If someone were excluding Haruna, I could understand. But the one excluding everyone… is Haruna.

Seira shook her head slightly.

"That's what I don't get. Even if I ask, she won't answer. She ignores all messages… Honestly, at this point, it would've been better if she just stopped coming to school!"

"I think it would be best if we could just apologize and move on… but Haruna doesn't seem interested in doing that…"

"To be blunt, Haruna's attitude in class is really bad right now. A lot of people are getting frustrated with her."

"… If this keeps up, the worst-case scenario…"

The rest of Minato-san's unfinished sentence was this:

"If this keeps up, the worst-case scenario… Haruna will be bullied."

That really would be… the worst possible future. Has she really angered everyone that much?

Bullying is always the bully's fault. The victim is never to blame—the ones in the wrong are the people around them.

But logic like that means nothing right now.

At the very least, Haruna is willingly throwing herself into hell. I can't just assume that Haruna will be fine somehow. The human heart isn't built to endure the malice of many.

I was crushed by the malice of just one person.

Why?

Why are you doing such a thing? Haruna, why?

In my head, an alarm bell rings out like the sound of a heartbeat.

If Haruna truly breaks down and ends up not going to school, I would regret it so deeply that nothing could ever make up for it.

Seira-san crosses her arms and leans deeply against the sofa.

"I'm really pissed off at Haruna, and I'm still totally pissed off even now! But it's not like I want to go that far, and I don't want those around her to do that either!"

"Onee-san."

Minato-san's eyes fix on me.

"It might be strange for us to ask this. But... if Haruna's trigger is you, then the only person who can change her feelings is you, Onee-san."

"……"

I wonder if that's true. In the end, Haruna did not take our... my hand.

'Because it has nothing to do with me,' she said, pushing me away.

...But.

Finally, it became clear.

As expected, the one Haruna was angry at was me. If it's like this, I can say it. After all, it’s not like it has nothing to do with me, right?

I should be able to take one more step into Haruna's heart. If only I had the courage.

"Yeah."
I nodded.

I lift my face and look at the two of them.

"Got it. Thank you, both of you, for doing so much for Haruna."

"No… I'm sorry for even using such a forceful method."

Minato-san removed my handcuffs with a small key.

"No, thank you for telling me."
I rub my wrist and nod deeply once more.

"I'll try talking to Haruna again."

"Are you okay? Haruna is extremely stubborn, though."

"I might not be okay, but still, I have to do it."
I give Seira-san a wry smile.

No matter how much you try to push me away, I won't let that happen.

Because…

"Haruna is my little sister… and I'm her big sister, after all."

I know I've shown my pathetic side so many times, but still… A middle schooler might see a high schooler as an adult, even just a little. I put on a brave front and said that with all my might.

A Tale of Amaori Haruna — Part 4

My big sister has been staying at home all the time lately.

A so-called school refusal. This is what they call a "hikikomori." I had heard about it on social media and the news, but when I learned that there are actually hundreds of thousands of such people in Japan, I was shocked.

"Morning."

"....."

Even when we see each other in the washroom in the morning, my big sister doesn't return my greeting. Her daily routine is completely messed up, so it looks like she's going to sleep now.

Her hair is messy. Her shirt is baggy. Her face, hidden behind overgrown bangs, looks lifeless, and I even doubt if she’s taking care of her skin properly.

Watching my big sister’s ghost-like figure walk away, I think to myself. If I ever end up like that, it’s over for me.

"…Lame"

Even so, I was still worried about her. At least at first. I even tried talking to her carefully, like handling something delicate. But she ignored me almost completely.

I even borrowed a book about hikikomori from the elementary school library and tried reading it.

When my friends saw me, I casually brushed it off, saying, "I'm just interested in social issues." That memory is still fresh.

But it was all meaningless.

My big sister seemed as if her personality had been completely replaced by someone else. Even the few good things I acknowledged about her were completely gone.

That's no longer the big sister I knew.

By now, Haruna completely looks down on her older sister. Of course. She lowered herself all on her own.

Lame. Pathetic. Uncool. Spineless. Sloppy. Frustrating.

I don't go out of my way to be mean to her, but that's only because I really hate bullying the weak. I had already completely given up on her.

"Guess I'll go to school."

I grab my school backpack from my room, put it on, and leave the house. Lately, the most annoying thing at school was when people talked about my big sister. Having a big sister like that isn't something I can brag about to anyone.

Every time, Haruna just brushed it off vaguely.

Each time, the irritation in my chest grew bigger.

"Speaking of which, the movie that was on the other day—"

A casual chat time in the classroom.

While forcing a laugh, I wonder why I have to feel like this because of my big sister, and my frustration grows.

That day, when Haruna came home, she called out to her mother in the living room.

"Hey, Mom, I want to watch a movie on the computer..."

My big sister was sitting in front of the shared computer in the living room, even though she had one in her own room.

"She's using it right now, isn't she?"

"Ehh? So annoying!"

She said that with a laugh, and my sister sluggishly stood up and left the living room.

Seeing that, Haruna snorted.

A scolding voice came from the kitchen, directed at Haruna.

"Seriously, Haruna..."

Mom says that, but, big sister isn't even living seriously, so she shouldn't get in the way of people who are.

Haruna sat down in the seat where her older sister had been sitting and started watching a movie using the family subscription. That horror movie, which is popular among elementary school girls right now, was scarier than she expected. When it got late at night, Haruna couldn't fall asleep at all.

(No way, that was way too scary...! Did everyone really watch that...!?)

She had never realized that she was bad with horror.

Which is exactly why she couldn't bring herself to stop halfway and ended up watching until the end.

(In the first place, it's not like I'm bad with horror...)

I had never been scared when watching horror movies with my friends before. But this movie was on a whole different level—two or three levels above that.

When I close my eyes, it feels like a ghost could jump out from the shadows at any moment, and it gives me chills. At this rate, I'll end up going to school tomorrow without sleeping. More importantly, being seen as scared by everyone would be the worst. Even in the world of elementary school girls, if you're looked down on, it's over.

I tried crawling into my futon with the lights on, but I still didn't feel like I could sleep.

(The worst...)

I got up and headed for the door.

(I'll just go to the toilet once...)

However, the moment I opened the door, I regretted it. What spread out beyond my room was complete darkness. Everywhere was filled with shadows.

(Ugh...)

I unintentionally groaned in my mind. The toilet was right there, yet I couldn't find the courage to step forward. My imagination was changing the shape of the world.

Was the night always this dark? The only light source was the faint glow seeping through the gap in my sister's room.

It's hopeless. I have no choice but to sleep without going to the toilet. But that felt like a mission with an extremely high difficulty level.

I grit my teeth.

As I stood at the border between light and darkness, unable to move forward or backward...

My big sister’s room's door opened.

Slowly, my big sister appeared. She noticed me and suddenly stopped.

"....."

But at that moment, Haruna turned her face away.

There’s no way I’m asking this big sister for help. As a sixth grader, not being able to go to the toilet alone is way too lame. I’m not that much of a coward.

Seeing Haruna frozen in place, she tilted her head, but only for a moment. Then, she left her room and went to the toilet like it was nothing. She pulled it off effortlessly. Well, of course—she didn’t watch the movie!

My big sister came back from the toilet. Her room’s door shut with a bang.

(Tsk…)

For some reason, I felt like I had just missed a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and I couldn’t help but clench my fist. Anger towards my big sister welled up—though even I knew that this time, it was completely unreasonable.

Just as I was about to imagine every insult I could think of in my mind, my big sister’s room’s door opened again.

"Huh…?"

This time, she walked straight toward Haruna.

"Haruna."

For the first time in a long while, my big sister called my name.

My big sister, looking nervous with her eyebrows lowered, cautiously asked me, as if checking my mood for some reason.

"Do you need to go to the toilet?"

…… After a long, long silence, Haruna gave a small nod.

"I'll go."

And then… how did it end up like this?

Now, Haruna was lying on a futon spread out on the floor of her older sister's room, sleeping side by side with her, eyes closed.

Just a while ago, her older sister had been saying things like, "That movie was really scary, right?" "I watched it too, but…" "Apparently, there were paranormal incidents even during the filming," as if trying to cover for herself. But when Haruna didn't respond, she eventually fell silent.

A dark room, without even a single nightlight on.

But just the simple fact that her older sister was right beside her made the fear she had felt earlier mysteriously disappear. There was definitely some frustration toward herself for having been helped by her of all people.

But there was something else—something difficult to put into words—lingering in her heart.

Because she had stayed up late, her eyelids soon became heavy. Her

body slowly sank into a lake of exhaustion. In the darkness, even if she strained her eyes, she couldn’t see her older sister lying on the bed.

(Onee-chan...)

The way she murmured that name in her heart somehow already felt nostalgic. Even after that night, there were no special conversations between Haruna and her older sister.

Even so, when her older sister came to her, bowing her head and saying she wanted to stop being a shut-in, Haruna thought she might be willing to help. Maybe it was because of this night.

Chapter 7 : A once-in-a-lifetime sisterly fight? No way!

Finally.

Just one more step until I peel away my little sister's strong mask.

But... When I look back after everything is over, I wonder—why was I so desperate?

Well, of course. Since my little sister was in trouble, doing my best as her big sister was only natural. She's helped me so many times, and I owe her a lot.

If my sister hadn't been there, I wouldn't have been able to make my high school debut, and I wouldn't have met Quintet either.

In other words, I wouldn't have become lovers with Mai, wouldn't have dated Satsuki-san for two weeks and grown closer to her, wouldn't have accompanied Ajisai-san when she ran away from home, and wouldn't have participated in a cosplay event with Kaho-chan.

Most of the things that make up who I am now might as well not have existed.

In short, the person known as Amaori Renako was created because of Amaori Haruna's existence, and that is seriously no exaggeration.

When you lay it out like that, it seems completely natural that I would want to repay my sister.

Furthermore, if the reason my little sister stopped going to school and doesn't talk to anyone in class apparently has something to do with me, then that makes it even more important.

Even if it was something Haruna did on her own, now that I know about it, I can't just ignore it. It's practically a noble cause. If I don't take action, it would be questionable as a human being!

That's how it should be, but...

For some reason, those reasons didn't feel quite right to me.

"Since someone did something for me, I'll repay them." That should basically be the way I live my life.

All this time, I've been trying to repay the kindness I've received from those around me at least twice as much. That should have been my way of life, but...

But when it comes to Haruna, I couldn't help but feel that there must be a more fitting word to express my feelings.

The closest concept to it is probably… this thing called "love."
I want Haruna's future to be happy, now and forever.

Because whether my little sister—who will continue to walk just a little behind me in life while living in the same house—is smiling or not has an incredibly big impact on my own happiness.

If that's the case, then this love—it's love, but still—what does 'love for myself' even mean? That's right, the answer is… self-love! Or something like that…

The true nature of what is called 'family love' or 'sibling love' turned out to be self-love for me, which kind of feels like a not-so-great conclusion, but…

But probably, that's just how it is. No matter how much our relationship changes, no matter how many times it does, as things keep changing, that alone won't change.

Sisters are beings who feel so far away that they don’t even seem like family, yet too close to be considered strangers. I am sure that I reach out to my sister for my own sake.

That’s why.

"Haruna."

"Hm?"

That night, after Seira-san and Minato-san had their talk, I called out to stop Haruna, who had just gotten out of the bath.

My sister, who had gathered her long hair with a claw clip after finishing with the hairdryer, turned back.

Looking up at her. I wonder when it was that my sister surpassed my height.

"What? I have something to do now, so I’m not free."

Pretending not to notice the gentle rejection, I immediately decide to state my business.

Ahem. After clearing my throat, I spread my arms. Then, putting on a smile like the sun, I say.

"This Sunday, want to go on a date with me?"

"…Huh?"

Just like Mai did. To open my little sister’s heart, I need to take a step closer first. This time for sure, I absolutely can’t afford to fail.

* * *

The holiday was sunny, and the sunlight was gentle. Today could be called the perfect day for a date. Come to think of it, on days I've gone out with my sister, I feel like the weather has always been on our side.

Does she even have the power of a sunny-weather girl…?

As I was waiting at the entrance, my sister comes down the stairs lightly.

"You're so slooow~"

Thinking of complaining to my sister, who unusually took a long time to get ready, I turn around. And then, I was surprised.

"Sorry, sorry."

My sister, raising one hand with a completely unapologetic face, was dressed stylishly. Of course, my sister always has good fashion sense, but today, she looks kind of glamorous. Specifically, she's wearing proper makeup, a top that shows her shoulders, and on top of that, she let her hair down.

Usually, her ponytail, tied up like a sports club member, is her signature look, but that's exactly why letting her hair down completely changes her impression.

Her long hair, which I only ever see after she gets out of the bath, is swaying smoothly.

Somehow… she looks really girly.

"Hm?"

"Ah, no… It's just… you're really dressed properly, I mean…"

"It's not like I'm putting in extra effort or anything. It just takes time, so I normally don’t do it. If you had told me, I could’ve done this much."

My sister gives me a deadpan stare. Ah, she’s still holding a grudge over me bringing Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san without notice…!

"Even when I went out for a meal with Mai-senpai, if you had told me earlier, I would have dressed appropriately."

"Ugh… Sorry."

"It’s fine, whatever. But when I dress up, I have to worry about sauce splashing and stuff, and I can’t focus on my food."

As my sister shrugs and picks out her shoes, I mention something just in case.

"Ah, we might be walking a bit today, so it might be better to wear comfortable shoes."

"Hmm."

Haruna chose her usual loafers.

Me? I only have one pair of sneakers, so I don’t really have a choice.

"Are you okay, big sis? You had blisters the other day."

"Ah, yeah. I’ve finally gotten used to them. Thanks for your help back then."

"I see."

My little sister responded bluntly and lightly put on her shoes. I open the door, and the nice weather greets us.

"Well then, let’s go."

"Okay~"

First, we head to the station. From there, we take the train, marking the start of our little outing.

"Ah, but before that—"

"Hm?"

Just as we stepped outside, my little sister stopped.

"I want you to promise me something."

"What for?"

"I'm going along with this date with you as a special favor."

"U-uh."

I was the one who invited her, but when the word 'date' comes from my little sister’s mouth, it feels really awkward. I think she sees it as a fun outing, though…

"Don’t talk about school refusal. It’s too troublesome."

"Ah..."

"If you can’t promise, I’ll go home right now, okay?"
Just a few steps out of the entrance, my sister speaks. To think she immediately sees through my scheme and warns me—she’s really sharp. Maybe I’m being too obvious... Suddenly inviting my own sister on a date is weird, after all.

"Got it. I promise."

"Good."

My sister nods exaggeratedly.

"Well then, please escort me properly, big sister."

She extends her hand to me. Somehow, when she says it like that, I get nervous...

As if holding a tool I'm not used to, I nervously grasp my little sister's hand.

"I'll do my best, as much as I can."

Apparently, that response wasn't to my sister's liking.

With a "good grief" kind of look, my sister shook her head slightly.

Tch... I'll do my best!

My little sister and I walked all the way to the station, still holding hands. From an outsider's perspective, we must look like an unbelievably close pair of sisters.

Even though I know she's my little sister, she looks unusually good today, so I end up getting unnecessarily nervous...

If I had known, I would've prepared a conversation deck in advance. But against my little sister...? There are too many possibilities—so in the end, it's a battle relying on my own skills.

Inside the train, we stand side by side, holding onto the hand straps.

For some reason today, my little sister isn't touching her phone at all. Even while traveling, she just gazes at the scenery.

Occasionally, she glances at me.

"Um..."

"Hm?"

My little sister tilts her head slightly. Unlike me, her always well-cared-for hair has a nice scent.

"...Why did you say 'okay'?"

"About the date?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's because..."
My sister mumbles.

...Huh?

"Eh? What?"

"How should I say this..."

She avoids making eye contact, like a girl being asked, "Do you like someone?" by her crush. What!? What kind of reaction is that!? Stop acting so misleading! You're making my heart race, you know!?

"Because... you're my big sister..."

"Eh!?"

No way. There was no sign of this at all. And now, all of a sudden—this huge display of affection!?

My little sister, with a natural blush on her cheeks—not from makeup—glanced at me from the side.

"I mean... I found out from online news that you got dumped, so I thought maybe I should at least be a little nice to you... or rather..."

"....."

It was just a huge dose of pity.

"That's not it, okay...?"

My little sister gave a graceful smile, looking as if she wanted to say, "Ah, yeah, it's fine, it's fine, okay, okay."

"Yeah, that's right."

"That's not it!?"

"I might not be able to take the place of that person, but today, I'll be as kind to you as I can..."

"You're avoiding saying the name on purpose!? What is this, Voldemort!? I'm fine! I'm not hurt, okay!?"

No matter how much I shout that it's a misunderstanding, it seems my sister has already decided that I'm just a pathetic woman who was toyed with by Mai.

Th-This girl...! I want to show her just how much Mai loves me...!

Mai and I are totally lovey-dovey♡, you know...! It's really, really true...!?

"Now that I think about it, you haven't asked."

As I walk along the platform at Uma Station after getting off the train, I

turn back to look at my sister, who is still holding my hand like a little girl.

"What?"

"Well, I mean, you haven’t asked 'Where are we going?'"

"It's a date, right?"

"Did 'date' ever mean something like a mystery tour...?"

"What? What's a mystery tour?"

"Eh? Um... I think it's a travel plan where the destination is kept secret from the participants."

"Ohh, that sounds fun. It's kind of like a surprise prank, huh?"

"Uh, yeah."

If it were my usual little sister, she’d probably glare at me like a thug and say, "Why do you even know that? Gross." But today, she hasn’t...

Something feels off... Not that I mind her being nice or anything. I do like kind people, after all...

"I wish she were always like this..."

When I muttered that, my sister looked a little sulky.

"Ahh, big sis, you said something unnecessary~."

"Huh? Sorry."

"That statement really makes it clear how you see me on a regular basis~."

"It's just the truth!"

"Alright, date points: minus one."

A finger was pointed at me.

"What do you mean by 'date points'...?"

"A date is about how much you can entertain the other person, I think. Even if you're acting differently than usual, or if it's just empty flattery, as long as it makes them enjoy themselves or gets their heart racing, it's justified. That's what I believe a date is."

"I feel like that's a valid opinion..."

"Keeping that in mind, one more time."

My little sister's big eyes stare intently at me.

Receiving a gaze like that of a girlfriend eagerly waiting for an anniversary gift, I got completely flustered.

"Uh, um..."

Honestly, something like this is too embarrassing to say, but...
Relying on my sister’s words, "Even if you're acting differently than usual," I put on an awkward smile.

"H-Haruna, you're always cute, but today you're especially cute."

Haruna's reaction to those words was...

...a serious face.

.....

...Say something!?

My shoulder was lightly patted.

"Date points: +2."

"Ah! Did I recover!?"

"If you had said it more smoothly, you could've gotten 3 points."

"I will improve!"

My sister muttered in a small voice, "Maybe I should've made her practice dating too... But if it was against that certain person, she would've been dumped either way..."

I haven’t broken up with Mai!!

"But well..."

My sister smiles cheerfully, just like a perfect girlfriend would.

"Even if it's just a compliment you don’t mean, that's the vibe, . A date is basically like playing pretend—seeing how much you can enjoy acting like a couple."

"…Not really."

"Huh?"

I say while averting my gaze.

"It’s not like I don’t mean it, but... My little sister is always cute."

"Oh?"

My sister places her hand on her chin.

"3 points."

"I'm not trying to score points!"

"That 'I'm not trying to score points!' already sounds like you are."

"Dating is way too complicated!"

I hold my head in frustration. At this rate, I won't be able to say anything.

My sister laughs, narrowing her eyes. "Ahaha." Only her sleeping face and her laughing face look appropriate for her age. Other than that, she's a mature-looking, high-quality, high-class beauty of the Amaori family.

I'm also wearing the clothes I bought with my little sister the other day, so I think my outfit is decent enough... But why does it feel so different?

My sister looks undeniably stylish. She doesn't look like she's being overwhelmed by her clothes at all. Appearance-wise, she already looks almost no different from a high schooler. If anything, she looks more mature than me...? No way.

Well, I do think it's a good thing that Haruna-sensei, who teaches me about fashion, is on such a high level, but...

Isn't the gap between us a bit too big?

"You know, little sister..."

"What?"

"So... do you have someone you're dating?"

Until now, we had never talked about this kind of thing as sisters. It was a somewhat embarrassing topic. My sister's cheeks were also turning red.

"H-Huh?"

"No, I mean... you just have this refined aura or something."

You give off such a beautiful-girl vibe that if you casually said, "Oh, I have a college lover ," I'd probably just go, "Oh, I see."

Maybe to hide her embarrassment, my sister squeezed our joined hands tightly.

"…I don't, though."

"Eh? Really?"

"I don't. I've never had one."

"Wow... That's unexpected."

"For now, I want to spend my time on club activities, friends, studying, and hobbies."

That's something a girl who could get a lover anytime would say...!

Well, I guess she really could if she wanted to. Actually, the hard part would be for the person dating my sister. She would probably expect her partner to have the same or even higher specs than her...

"I see, I see."

I do my best to smile cheerfully.

"If you get into a relationship, you should bring them home. Your big

sister will properly greet them for you."

"Reaaally?"

Why are you looking at me like that? I acted properly even when I first met Seira-san and Minato-san, right??

But now that you mention it...

"I wonder... The kind of person who'd date my little sister probably seems like a super gal-type, strong-willed... That might be scary... Scary..."

Maybe someone like that hairstylist my sister introduced me to will show up. Like, 'Ohh, it's Onee-chan-chan! Yoroyoropi~☆' with that kind of vibe...

While I was busy being scared of my sister’s girlfriend, she suddenly seemed to realize something.

"Umm…"

"Hm?"

"…It's not like I like girls or anything, okay?"

"Huh?"

When she said that, I realized.Come to think of it… I just assumed my sister’s partner would be a girl? I did that completely unconsciously.

My sister muttered awkwardly.

"Well, I guess that's just normal for you, big sis."

"No, that's not it!"

I shook my head vigorously.

"That’s not what I mean! How should I put it?! It’s just that it only applies to the person I’m dating! No! That’s not it, okay!?"

"So, big sis, since when did you start liking girls?"

"Don't ask me like we're having some kind of heart-to-heart sisterly talk! I told you, it's not like that!"

My sister seemed to think I was just misunderstanding things. But she's wrong!

Before we knew it, we arrived at our destination.

After a ten-minute walk from there, nature that didn’t quite fit in the city welcomed us. My sister's eyes sparkled like a child seeing Santa for the first time, and she let out an excited voice.

"It's a zoo!"

That's right, it's a zoo. Heh heh heh. My sister, still full of energy, turned around and clung to my arm. Hawa!

"Wow, it's been so long! Eh? Why, why?"

Ugh... A radiant beauty... So dazzling. I feel like I'm going to melt under my sister's gaze.

"Haruna, you've always liked zoos, haven't you?"

"I love them!"

That's right, my sister loves zoos.

Even when we came as a family, she wanted to stay until the very last moment before closing. Back then, she stayed in front of the red panda exhibit the whole time, if I remember correctly.

That said, since that was back when she was in elementary school, I didn't expect her to still be this happy about it.

She's pretty cute, huh...

Feeling a bit smug, I ask my sister.

"Did I earn some date points?"

"30,000 points!"

"Choosing the location decides the outcome way too much!"

"Hurry, let's buy the tickets! Let's line up and get them!"

Feeling even more proud, I lifted my phone.

"I already bought them online. Now we just need to print them."

"Big sis...! B-Big sis...!?"

What’s with that reaction? I feel like my identity just got questioned. I'm still the same big sister on the inside!

"Since it's a date, I have to at least do this, right?"

"You're getting too carried away!"

She lightly pats my back. The way she does it, like lovers playfully messing around, is actually more ticklish than anything.

"Alright, let's go."

"Yeah!"

My cheerful sister stayed clinging to my arm for a while after that.

… I can't walk properly…!?

This zoo, which has been around long before I was born, had hardly changed from how I remembered it. With the zoo map in one hand, we walk around the zoo.

"It's an elephant! It's so big!"

My sister already seems to have reverted to a little girl's vocabulary.

"A monkey parent and child! They're eating leaves!"

The zoo was fairly crowded, but my sister didn’t seem to mind at all. She kept running up to the enclosures one after another, excitedly shouting.

"Look! A tiger! There's a tiger! Whoa!"

"It’s fine. It’s in a cage, so it’s not dangerous."

"It’s so big! Looks so strong! Whoa!"

Ignoring my silly comment, my sister faces the cage and roars, "Gaoo!"

My sister especially likes big animals and carnivores. The reason? "Because they look strong."

I don’t really get it, but somehow, I kind of do. She must like that extraordinary feeling.

Even so, my sister, who just a moment ago seemed so mature, was now jumping around like a three-year-old, creating quite the contrast. Of

course, in a good way.

"Wow, those fangs are amazing. A human would probably go down in one hit… So cool…"

My sister murmurs dreamily.

Wait. Is she… jealous of the tiger? Do you… want power?

"Don’t you ever go to the zoo with friends?"

My sister smiles like she just saw someone who calls every game console a "Famicom."

"No way, I don’t go. That’s so childish!"

Aren’t second-year middle schoolers still kids…!?

"Everyone goes to cafés and stuff, you know. At most, maybe an aquarium?"

"Ah. Now that you mention it, I do have the impression that aquariums are the go-to place for outings. Why isn’t it the zoo?"

"Isn’t it because zoos are mainly for families? You have to walk a lot, and your feet get tired. It’s hot in summer and cold in winter. And there’s the smell, too."

My sister happily badmouths the zoo, counting on her fingers. Then, she suddenly flashes a smile at me.
"I mean, I can’t get this excited in front of my friends."

"Really?"

"It’s way too childish!"

Well, I guess… Unlike me, my sister probably has to think about how others see her. She’s usually really responsible, after all.

"Is it okay to act like this in front of me?"

My sister looked completely puzzled.

"Huh? But you’re my big sister, aren’t you?"

With no explanation at all. As if that alone was enough to explain everything. Maybe I’m just imagining it, but… it felt like something that couldn’t just be summed up with ‘because we’re family’ or something like that. I felt an immense sense of trust.

No, but that’s definitely just a misunderstanding. If she really trusted me, she would have already confided all her worries to me by now.

Just a little, my chest ached. Without noticing how I felt, my sister smiled.

"Coming here alone feels kind of weird, but coming after so long is fun!"

"Hmm… That’s good."

That really is true. However, for some reason, my sister stepped closer to me.

"What about you, big sis?"

"Huh?"

Suddenly being stared at, I panicked and raised both my hands.

"It’s fun, of course. I like animals too."

"Then look like you’re having more fun! Come on! Hurry up!"

"Eh!?"

That’s such an unreasonable demand… I timidly raised my right hand.

"Y-Yay… So fun…"

A flood of criticism came my way.

"You’re being too shy! Even the animals are doing this as a business, you know? They won’t put on a show for customers who don’t look like they’re having fun!"

"I don’t think that’s true!"

"Ah! Because you don’t look like you’re having fun, the tiger is going deeper inside! See!"

"Yay! Super fun!"

"Smile from your gut more!"

"So fun!!"

"You’re being too loud, big sis. The tiger is going deeper inside again!"

"You… seriously, you… you…"

I seriously want to deduct a huge amount of date points from her...

"Alright, next is the polar bear! Big sis, make sure to smile properly again, okay?"

"Yay!"

At this rate, I’m not a lover—I’m just a puppet! After that, I was repeatedly made to smile until my facial muscles were on the verge of

cramping... Somehow, even my mood started getting weird...

We had lunch inside the zoo, then went to see the seals. While taking a break, we were amazed by the giraffe’s presence up close.

My sister and I kept going back and forth through the crowds without getting bored. We explored every corner of the zoo, from reptiles to birds. And so, we spent the entire time enjoying the zoo.

Before we knew it, it was closing time.

When I went on a date in Odaiba with Mai, and when I went to an amusement park with Ajisai-san, it was the same—dates always seem to end in the blink of an eye. After making a full round, we found ourselves back in front of the tiger’s cage.

"But too bad, huh, big sis?"

"What?"

"The koalas. Even though you like them."

"Ah, yeah."

This zoo doesn’t have koalas. That’s a bit disappointing, but oh well.

"Today’s main star isn’t me, it’s my little sister."

"That sounded a bit fake. Zero points."

"That’s not what I meant..."

I laugh in exasperation.

"But today’s total was pretty good."

"No way. You didn’t actually count, did you?"

"Well, who knows?"

My sister smirks. Huh? No way... could she have really counted...?

Acting all mysterious, my sister stretches out.

"Still, you did pretty well, big sis. It actually turned into a proper date. Totally unexpected. I mean, back when we went shopping, you were such a mess, freaking out everywhere."

"You really didn’t have to add that."

"I mean, all I ever see of you at home is your totally lame self, so this was seriously unexpected."

"Second sentence!"

My sister, who knows exactly where to tease me, laughs with a sound like 'ahaha.'

This...

Well, but if you had fun, I’m glad. I have to make sure you have fun, at least. Because from now on, I’m going to talk about something not fun.

"Hey, Haruna."

When I call her name, her large sparkling eyes look toward me.

"What?"

Even though I knew the time to go home had long passed, I looked like I was still staying in the classroom, not wanting to go home, with a face like that.

"I heard about school."

Haruna was still wearing a faint smile.

"Big sis, you made a promise when you left this morning, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you breaking the promise?"

Rather than blaming me, my sister just said it in a lonely way. The pain in my chest grew stronger.

But I nodded.

"Yeah."

My sister sighed as if she had given up.

"Ahh… I wonder why. The way home is gonna be awkward, you know? You should've at least held back until we got home. Big sis, you seriously do this kind of thing all the time. You're way too bad at handling things."

My sister smiled as if she were saying, "Well, that's just how it is."

"Today was actually pretty fun, though. So, all of this was just to get information out of me, huh? Even the point-scoring, all of it."

I stayed silent.

My sister pointed at me and laughed as I stayed silent.

"In the end, your total date points dropped to zero."

"Yeah, I guess I can't complain if you call it point-scoring."

I quietly admitted it.

"But I think at least a little of it got through."

"What ?"

As my sister asked back, I answered awkwardly.

"Uh… that I actually like you quite a bit, Haruna."

My little sister seemed somewhat surprised by my words.

The aspect that made this outing clearly different from before. It was the fact that this was a date for my sister.

Until now, I had always been the one receiving help from her. Even going to the hair salon, even shopping—everything was like that. Even though Haruna did everything for me, I was never able to give anything back to her.

It's only natural that she wouldn't trust me like this. No matter how much I say it, there's no way she'd believe me. So I decided to take action to remove Haruna’s emotional walls. In the end… that, too, is just my own selfishness.

But that's fine. Haruna has always been a part of me.

"This."

I took a small package out of my bag.

While we were walking around the zoo, I secretly bought it without my sister noticing. My younger sister, having received it, timidly opened the package. A round wolf plush toy, attached to a keychain, appeared.

"Haruna, I thought you might like something like this."

"A wolf?"

"Probably."

My younger sister looked a bit taken aback and let out a small sigh.

"The plush toy in my room—it's not a wolf, you know."

"Huh? Really?"

"It's a dingo."

"I didn't know that..."

Dingoes are more like dogs. They're apparently a type of wild dog that lives in Australia.

A near miss...!

"Should I return it...?"

"I've already opened it. This is fine."

"Yes..."

Sigh... I can't look cool.

"Anyway, that's how it is!"

I reluctantly wrap up the conversation.

"I might break promises, try to earn points, and be an irresponsible big sister. Even so, if Haruna isn't looking happy like usual, I can't do it! I'll

do anything for that!"

I thought I'd act like an older sister until the end today, but it seems impossible after all.

"Now, I'm going to talk about something important!"

I make that opening statement with the intention of reinforcing my resolve.

My sister looks back at me while holding the plush toy with both hands.

It's okay. It will definitely go well. I've set everything up until now. My feelings should surely have been conveyed to Haruna.

I'm nervous.

"The other day, I heard from Seira-san and Minato-san. They said Haruna is alone at school. And I heard that the reason Haruna got angry was for my sake, after all."

"....."

Haruna doesn't respond.

I unilaterally make a demand, believing that it will surely be for both of our sake.

"It's about time I want you to tell me. Why did you stop going to school? Why are you trying to be alone now?"

"Why is my always pure and righteous sister doing something she can't tell anyone?"

"Tell me, your big sister."

Haruna, with her arms crossed, closed her eyes just for a moment.

"Sigh."

She let out a sigh.

The air that envelops us changes.

"I see, I see. Finally, it's been found out."

Normally, this would be the moment to give up. Even at a point where the real culprit would normally start spilling their motive to the detective, Haruna's voice still sounded overly optimistic and untrustworthy.

"Fine. If it’s been found out to that point, I’ll tell you. However, it's not about what I'm trying to do, but only about why I’m trying to do it."

I furrow my brow at her roundabout way of speaking.

"Yeah."

Even so, I wanted to hear Haruna’s words. Haruna grips the stuffed toy with one hand and smiles.

"If people find out that you're an introvert, it’d be inconvenient."

"…What?"

"I mean, think about it. I went through all that effort to bring you back onto the right path, didn’t I? Then I should have the right to enjoy at least a little bit of the benefits, right?"

Benefits…? What do you mean by that?

"What do you mean?"
"If big sister is super extroverted, popular in class, and even close with

famous people… then as her little sister, I must be special too. Right?"

Driven by baseless feelings, I deny my sister’s words.

"That’s a lie. You always tell me that relying on someone else’s influence, like a fox borrowing a tiger’s authority, is the most uncool thing."

"It just means I was your little sister."

"If that were true, you would have looked more guilty when it was found out."

"Maybe I’m just playing it cool."

"I can't believe it."

"I knew you’d say that."

If this wasn’t an act and was actually Haruna’s true nature, then it would mean I never really understood anything about her, despite all the time we spent together.

There’s no way that’s true.

"But it’s already been found out, you know?"

I pressed closer to Haruna .

“Minato-san told you, didn’t she? That I used to be an introvert. Minato-san’s older sister was my former classmate… So no matter what you say, Haruna, it’s already too late, isn’t it…?”"

"That’s why you need to work hard enough to blow away those silly rumors, big sis."
As if she were cheering for me, Haruna clenches her fist tightly. From

the way she spoke so deliberately, I realized—ah, she had simply switched the mask she wore.

Does she really think that makes sense?

"It’s impossible at this point! Because Minato-san’s older sister, Nashiji Komachi-san is..."

She was the one who excluded me.

No matter what Haruna and I say, it’s pointless.

"…What about Minato’s older sister?"

Haruna narrows her eyes, emanating an ominous aura. I flinched for a moment.

I hurriedly changed the subject.

"No, what I mean is… if a former classmate spreads it, there’s nothing we can do."

"Why do you always assume that? You’re always like this—thinking you can’t do it. That’s strange, isn’t it?"

Haruna crossed her arms and looked back at me.

"You won’t know unless you try. I’m not backing down, and I can already see myself winning through persistence. So don’t get in my way."

If Haruna just stayed quiet like this… Or if I just continued my school life as usual, would the rumors really disappear?

If the rumors don’t disappear…

If everyone finds out that I used to be an introvert, not just in middle

school but also at Ashigaya High School…

The members of Quintet might not change. But what about everyone else's reactions?

If the rumors spread that I was a former truant and a bullied kid, then… Even though I'm in Quintet, the people who have respected me until now might start to distance themselves. The people who cheered me on, like during the sports festival, will be gone.

People might talk behind my back, saying that even though I'm just an introvert, I'm getting full of myself. I might end up feeling out of place.

I can't believe in people's goodwill. I can't just assume everything will be fine and be optimistic.

No matter how much people say it's wrong, there are still cheaters everywhere, people who disconnect on purpose, and people who verbally abuse both their opponents and their own teammates—they won't disappear.

If you show any weakness, the malice of the world will bare its fangs and come after you. If only I could live with the strong belief that everything will be fine because my precious friends understand me… how nice that would be.

At least, I can't.
But.

"But if things stay like this, Haruna will…"

"The idea of you worrying about me is a hundred years too early."

Haruna always says that. Acting composed, saying, "I can do it, because I'm different from you."

However, at this moment, I was finally able to doubt those words. I wonder what the truth really was. Could it be that she’s been dealing with everything inside herself, just so she wouldn’t burden me?

All this time.

"It's fine, just focus on yourself. You've finally had your high school debut and made lots of good friends. There are plenty of other things you should focus on, right?"

In the bath together, Haruna said that and laughed. I thought she was just teasing me like always… but could it have been different?

I grabbed Haruna’s wrist.

Even if I accepted all the disadvantages that fall upon me. If my life just became a little harder to live, if it means Haruna could return to the right path.

"W-What?"

"Then I'll say it at school tomorrow."

"Huh?"

I looked into Haruna’s eyes and declared.

"That I was a former introvert and a truant."

Immediately after, Haruna grabbed me by the collar.

"What are you saying?"

She must have realized that I was serious.

The fact that she understood me so clearly made me think, "Yeah, we really are sisters."

Hiding my fear, I met Haruna's gaze.

"Then Haruna won't have any reason to be stubborn anymore, right?"

Haruna's entire plan will go up in smoke.

"Are you stupid? No one wants that."

She brought her face close to mine, intimidating me. If I take even one step back, I feel like I'll be completely overwhelmed by her intensity.

"Even I…"

Contrary to my racing heartbeat, my mind is growing cold.

"I didn't ask you for this, Haruna, did I?"

"I'm doing this for myself! What about you!? It's different, isn't it!? There's no benefit for you!"

"There is."

I state firmly.

"I can repay Haruna for what I owe her, even if just a little."

"Are you stupid!?"

She shoves my shoulder, and I fall on my butt. The clothes I just bought get dirty. My sister yells, as if she doesn't even notice.

"I don't like that kind of self-sacrifice!"

"Then, why, Haruna—?"

"Huh?"

"Saying it’s all for yourself—that’s a lie, isn’t it? Even without someone like me, you can do anything, right? You’re the one sacrificing yourself for me, aren’t you, Haruna?"

"That’s not true! There’s no way I’d go this far for someone like you!"

Haruna’s enraged eyes looked like flames were dancing in them.

"I won’t forgive you. If you do something like that, I will never forgive you."

My sister growls as if spitting out embers. Haruna’s intense personality went beyond what I expected at the last moment.

"I’ll set it on fire."

"Huh…?"

What is she saying…?

"If you expose it yourself, I’ll burn the house down."

"Wait, that’s…"

I stand up and instinctively grab Haruna’s shoulder. She shakes me off.

"I'm serious."

Maybe, until now, I had never seen Haruna truly angry.

It was a fury so intense, it felt like my fingertips would turn to charcoal if I touched it.

"Why go that far?"

"Because I'm serious."

That day, Haruna went home first.

The words of rage, hammered in like a wedge, continue to burn in my heart.

***

All my memories with Haruna are just fights.
Ever since we were kids. I've heard all close-in-age sisters are like this, but Haruna was especially extreme—she never knew how to compromise.

Until I learned to bend easily, we were constantly fighting. The only time Haruna was cute was when she was really little. After that, she was always one-upping me.

She'd constantly throw sharp words at me, comment on my fashion and makeup, look down on me, and make me feel bad by comparing me to her more accomplished sister.

Having a sister really doesn't come with a single good thing.

Unlike friends, family is always there when you come home, and you can't just walk away. That closeness always ends up suffocating me.

And yet...

Why is it that I still can't distance myself from her?

Why is it that the day after I hated her so much I wanted to kill her, I end up loving her more than anyone else?

Amaori Haruna. My one and only sister.

She's my own flesh and blood. Like a part of me.

What was all that "I'll never forgive you" nonsense, anyway?
That's what I should be saying.

There's one more thing I've come to understand: just as Haruna is my little sister, I'm her big sister too.

I never realized I had such intense anger sleeping inside me.

This is it—a true sister fight. One so big it could burn everything between us to ash. A once-in-a-lifetime clash.

I don't exactly know what she's trying to do or who she's doing it for, but...

The reason doesn't matter anymore. It just doesn't.

Haruna really means it.

Alright. In that case, I'll do things the way I want to.

I'll go all in too.

***

That zoo date with Haruna already feels like a distant memory.
But in reality, it was just the next day. I gathered all of Quintet on the rooftop during lunch break.

"Class reunion?"
Mai, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan all said at the same time.

"Yeah."

Since yesterday, I've been trying hard not to let the frustration churning inside me show, and I forced a tense smile.

"Before we start, there's something I want to tell you all."

"I knew I'd get scared if I waited for their reactions, so I decided to say it all at once."

"The truth is… back in middle school, I was kind of a shut-in and an introvert."

To start, I decided to lay my entire past bare to the four of them.

And then...

"Eh!?"

First, Kaho-chan widened her big eyes in surprise.

Well, I guess I should say…
that was the only response.

Huh!?

"Come on, Ajisai-san!"

"Ah, oh... I see"

When I called her out by name, Ajisai-san nodded quickly.

She kind of looks like she's trying to accept a shocking truth that left her speechless… but probably not really.

No way… I was supposed to be pulling off the perfect extrovert act…

"Why!? How!? Weren’t you always the queen of extroverts, Rena-chin!?"

The only one who’s genuinely shocked is Kaho-chan.

Still, this isn’t the time to smirk and go “Hehe, fooled you ♡”.

The truth is, I tricked Kaho-chan with a pathetic little lie.

"Uh, y-yeah, um… I truly apologize…"

"Why!? Why, why!? Whyyy!?"

"Ugh…"

I thought rage might fuel me, but I don't think it will. I'm only mad at my sister - betraying Kaho's trust just plain hurts. I feel like I'm being torn apart.

Then Satsuki-san gently places her hand on Kaho-chan’s head.

"If you keep this up, Kaho, lunch break will be over. You can chew her out later. So, then?"

"Uh, um… I’m sorry, should I start with a full-on kneel apology?"

"That’s enough. So?"

Leaving behind Kaho-chan, who clearly wanted to keep interrogating, it looked like I had no choice but to follow Chairwoman Satsuki’s lead and move the conversation forward.
My heart! It aches!

Is this my punishment for lying? I never should have lied in the first place!

"So, um… if Haruna’s being so stubborn, I figured it’s probably my fault… and that’s why I thought…"

But now I can't tell everyone the truth anymore.
Even if threatening to burn the house was just a bluff, the moment I believed she might really do it… I had already lost.

So then… what do I do now?
Looking around at everyone, I began to speak.

"I said, let's just pretend the past never happened."

I’d told myself that countless times.
"The future’s the only thing we can change. The past is unchangeable."
But… is that really true?

Haruna once said to me—
"You always decide things too fast. You’re always like, ‘I can’t do this, that’s impossible.’ But you don’t even know until you try."

It stings to admit she’s right… but I can’t deny it.

"If I erase my past as an introvert, whatever Haruna's trying to do will be meaningless—that’s the idea."

I copied Satsuki-san’s style and gave a smug little laugh.

"Serves her right!"

Ajisai gently warned me:
"Rena-chan, you shouldn't say things like that..."

"Oh—right…"

I immediately quieted down.
I mean, I was mad at my sister, not anyone else…

Then Mai, who had been quietly watching everything unfold, continued the conversation with her usual elegant tone.

"But seriously, what are you planning? Gonna build a time machine or something?"

"That sounds fun. While you're at it, I'd love to see a world where Mai and I never met."

"Haha."

Mai gave Satsuki-san a "you rascal" kind of smile. Honestly, I don't think she was joking.

"Well, it's not like I can actually build a time machine."

I mean, even if I could go back in time and save gloomy little middle school Renako, then I probably wouldn't have even tried to change myself by enrolling in Ashigaya High.

If I never met Mai and the others, there's no way I'd be happier than I am now.

"So what I'll be using... is this."

In other words, we're circling back to the start.

"The class reunion invitation…?"

I explained to Ajisai-san, who tilted her head as she looked at the invitation I'd yanked from my drawer.

"Honestly, back in middle school, I was barely noticeable. I don't think

anyone even remembers me."

It took a bit of guts to admit that in front of everyone, but I pulled it off.

No doubt—this is the power of pure rage.

"So I'm going to overwrite their memories—by flaunting my flashy high school self, I'll make them think, 'Come to think of it, wasn't Amaori always like that?'"

Before anyone could speak up, I thrust my hand forward.

"I know it's reckless! But to stop the rumors from even starting, I'll crush the source! This, right here, is my time machine!"

The four of them looked at each other, unsure of what to say.

Then, to my surprise, someone spoke up in support.

"I think it's a good idea."

It was Satsuki-san.

"What…? Satsuki-san, who always starts by rejecting others like it's her job, is actually supporting me…!? This is a once-in-a-century miracle!"

"Maybe I'll take it back after all."

"No! I'd really appreciate it if you could tell me your reason!"

Satsuki-san reluctantly began to explain.

"Human memory is fuzzy. Most people don't figure out who you are based on your past—they shape your past from how you look now, because that's what's in front of them. Impressions matter more than facts. It might sound dramatic to say you're changing the past, but when

it comes to other people’s memories, it’s actually possible."

But Satsuki-san simply added, "Of course."

"If you can really leave that strong of an impression, that is."

"Thank you! Hearing that really gives me confidence!"

And when it comes to rewriting impressions, I actually have a good chance. Because when it comes to being a popular type, I’ve got friends who shine like stars.

"So… please, everyone. Help me teach my stubborn little sister a lesson—lend me your strength!"

I bowed my head with all my heart. I know it’s selfish to ask after deceiving all four of them until now.

Even so, there’s no one I trust more than these four.

"I don’t mind helping, but…"

The first to speak was Ajisai-san, the angel of Ashigaya.

You’ve seriously saved my life more times than I can count…!

"So, what should we do?"

"Isn’t it easy?"

Then Kaho-chan jumped into the conversation.

"Can’t Maimai, Sa-chan, or A-chan just walk into the reunion and say, ‘I’m Amaori Renako, pyon!’ or something?"

"No way we could fool them like that!?"

Ajisai fired back at Kaho with full force. Even when making retorts, she looked adorable - truly angelic.

"That won't work? What if we wore name tags around our necks?"

"Definitely not... We'd never keep our stories consistent..."

"Hey, we could use intercoms! This is getting exciting - feels like a spy mission or something!"

"No way... We just graduated a year ago..."

Kaho-chan kept joking around like she was serious, and Ajisai-san kept giving her genuine retorts with a slightly troubled look.That scene was the very picture of peace at Ashigaya.

As much as I wanted to keep watching, I didn’t want Ajisai-san to suddenly snap and go, “Fine, let’s just do that!” So I gently stepped in to stop it.

"I really appreciate the thought, Kaho-chan… but that’s not quite it."

"Not that?"

Mai smiled, as if she already knew exactly what I wanted to say.

"Ugh… After everything I’ve asked from you all, it feels really selfish to say this, but… this time, I really think I need to do it myself…"

"Even though you’re saying ‘just this once,’ I bet you’ll keep relying on everyone’s help without hesitation."

Satsuki-san’s sharp remark hit me right in the chest. She's not wrong!

"But still!"

At that point, I stood my ground.

"I want to do it—me, myself!"

I pressed a hand to my chest and cried out.

"Because this is a fight my sister started with me!"

I know. I'm being completely selfish. Then, Ajisai-san let out a quiet giggle.

"You've got that side to you too, huh, Rena-chan?"

"Ugh…"

But it didn't seem like she meant anything bad. Ajisai-san smiled softly.

"I get it. With family, sometimes you just can't help being stubborn. I'm glad to know you feel that way about Haruna-chan."

"True. Sometimes, when you're trying to achieve something, you just can't compromise on how to do it—especially when it involves someone you see as a rival you don't want to lose to."

Satsuki-san gave a shrug as Mai looked her way.

"Well, it's not like Rena-chin's selfishness just started. She's already holding huge bouquets in both hands, after all."

My face grew hot as they said that. Mai and Ajisai-san were laughing cheerfully.

"But if you've come this far, I take it you already know what you want us to do?"

"Yeah."

I nodded in response to Mai's words.

To make a strong impression and conquer this high-difficulty dungeon called the class reunion, I needed—Maybe it's about levels or strong skills, but I know I can't gain those overnight. Swords, shields, armor, accessories—in other words, the strongest gear you can get that doesn't depend on your own abilities.

"Everyone,"

I dropped to my knees and bowed my head.

"Please… help me become the strongest version of myself!"

***

One day in November.

The class reunion was held at a local Italian restaurant that had been reserved just for the occasion.

It was a buffet-style setup, arranged so everyone could walk around and talk freely. Apparently, class reunions happen depending on whether the organizer is motivated or not.

And since this one was held only a year after we graduated middle school, the organizer must've been pretty enthusiastic.
(I couldn't quite remember who the organizer was though…)

Given that almost no one had left town, it's no surprise the turnout was quite high.
Everyone arrived looking just a bit more grown-up, catching up and

sharing memories like no time had passed at all.

Then—clack, clack—footsteps echoed.

Their steady rhythm sounded almost like applause, as if signaling the start of a ceremony.

The restaurant door opened, and everyone turned their gaze toward it.

There stood a girl, beautifully dressed to perfection.

She smiled at her curious former classmates—like a blooming bouquet.

"Long time no see, everyone."

And the one who had undergone such a dazzling transformation… was me, Amaori Renako.

***

Let me explain from the top what exactly happened to me.

Kyurukyuru... (The sound of time rewinding)

Of course, it's impossible for my whole personality to become Pretty Woman material in just a week—even if Richard Gere himself had produced me. It was all just a flimsy façade with no real substance.

But hey! There's a saying—clothes make the man!
If you dress the part, you'll look the part. That's just how it works!

Then why not? If I can pull off the look for just this one night, that's enough!

First up—the armor.

"So this is the outfit for the class reunion, huh?"

The four of us from the quintet paid a visit to Mai's house. (Satsuki-san couldn't make it—she had a part-time job.)

"Wow! Amazing!"

Kaho-chan bounced around like an adorable bunny who'd just discovered a carrot patch. Good for her, finally getting to visit Mai's place…

"Everything here is huge! Hey, MaiMai, are you secretly part of a giant race or something!? Are you like, four meters tall or what!? Is that why you need so much space!?"

"Are you kinda making fun of me right now!?"

I couldn’t help but retort, but Mai just smiled warmly.

"Having this many friends over… today’s a really happy day for me."

"If you’re okay with it, MaiMai, I’ll come over every day!"

"That sounds great."

Kaho-chan happily latched onto Mai’s arm.

She’s seriously going to come every day...? Kaho-chan… Not that I really mind… I guess...

"Hey, mind if I take a selfie?"

"Sure, I don’t mind. Just… could you not post it on social media?"

"Of course not! Betraying MaiMai’s trust just for a few likes would be totally not worth it!"

"That's... incredibly well planned."

So then what’s the point of the selfie...? Or so I thought—Apparently, just scrolling through a photo folder full of cute pics is enough to boost your mood. I don’t usually go back and look at my own photos, so I just thought, “Huh, I guess that makes sense...”

I mean, I’m not exactly up to date with youth trends… Well, okay, I do take screenshots when I win stuff and go back to look at them later.

It makes me feel good too… So yeah, I guess we're the same, huh, Kaho-chan?

"And this… is my dressing room."

"Wow…"

This time, it was Ajisai-san who let out a quiet gasp of wonder.
She and Kaho-chan were both staring wide-eyed in awe.

"This is amazing… really, really amazing~!"

"MaiMai's dressing room…! This is the kind of place you could charge people just to see!"

"Every single outfit is stored so carefully… Models really are something else~."

"I wanna see MaiMai wear every single outfit here!"

"Right?!~"

Their reactions were like fangirls who just shook hands with their favorite idol—it was seriously adorable, but...

Not being able to get excited with them… Am I missing something as a high school girl? I can't even manage to be a basic trendy girl…?

N-no, that's not it! Everyone likes different things—that's diversity!
If this were Mai's PC room, I'd totally be like:
"Whoa—those CPU benchmark scores are insane!"
"That graphics card keeps the frame rate super stable—8K monitor for the win!"

I'd totally be hyped too! It's the same thing!

While I was lost in that strange rivalry, Mai was already standing in front of a section of the dressing room.

"If we're going for something extravagant, this section should be good."

She'd already picked something out for me. I'm so grateful.

"But isn't there like a 10cm height difference between you and MaiMai? Will it be okay?"

"Of course. We might need to adjust the waist a bit, but we can use layering to enhance your figure, and tone-on-tone outfits to create a nice vertical line."

"Yeah, totally! I'm so excited to pick shoes too~ What kind of design should we go with?"

I see…

As Kaho-chan, Mai, and Ajisai-san excitedly talked, I just stood there watching like a dad dragged along on a shopping trip. Their fashion sense is on a whole other level… Maybe I'm not even a real high school girl…

"For example… look, how about something like this?"

Mai picked up a gorgeous, flared dress—something straight out of a princess movie.

"It's gorgeous~!"

Ajisai-san clapped her hands with the sparkling smile of a little girl who dreams of being a princess.

"Isn't that a bit over the top!? It's just a school reunion, not some kind of prom from a foreign movie!"

"If you're aiming to grab even more attention, this one's for you. You'd absolutely shine at any party."

Mai then pulled out a bold, bright red dress with an open back and a deep neckline.

"Wow, it's beautiful! Yeah, that one might actually be perfect!"

"Wait! Wait!"

Oh no—now even Ajisai-san is getting carried away!

I mean, sure—Mai's weird and Kaho-chan always gets too hyped, but Ajisai-san is supposed to be the calm, logical one! If she doesn't stay in character, I won't be able to enjoy watching this chaos unfold!

"Hehehe… Then allow me to present my most special dress!"

"Kyaa, kyaa! Rena-chan, try it on! Try it!"

"No way! I can't even fit into the waist!"

Ajisai-san was tugging hard on my arm—I've never seen her act like this before…!
Do fancy clothes… have the power to throw high school girls into chaos!?

"Kaho-chan! Help me bring them back to reality! Please!"

As we scrambled around, Kaho-chan snapped a photo of the moment.

"This is hilarious."

"Kahoooo-chaaan!"

And so, despite all the chaos, I somehow managed to borrow some designer clothes from Mai that would look totally natural at the reunion.

Legendary armor acquired! (?)

Next up—the shield.

If the gorgeous outfit I borrowed from Mai is the armor protecting my whole body, then the shield is what guards my most vulnerable point—my face.

So today, Kaho-chan and I visited Ajisai-san's house—the Sena family.

On the living room table was Ajisai-san's collection: sparkling little bottles and makeup tools packed so tightly, there was barely any space.

"Tada~!"
Ajisai-san spread her arms shyly.

"I mean, after seeing Mai-chan's outfits, this probably won't be much help… It's just a hobby of mine…"
She seemed a little embarrassed.

But the girl in front of me wasn't the dazzled angel from before—she was the calm and thoughtful Ajisai-san. And I had to treat her heart with care.

"That's not true at all!"
Clenching my fist with determination, I said,

"Being able to learn makeup from you is like winning the lottery a hundred times in a row! I'm so incredibly lucky!"

Ajisai-san puffed her cheeks slightly.

"Geez... Rena-chan, you always exaggerate things so much..."

Hehe. If it were the old me, I would've rhymed something like, "Ajisai-san, total respect! Always my top angel request!" and just kept praising her.

But now I know better. I understand that Ajisai-san's words don't always mean exactly what they say. After all, her cheeks are a little red—she's obviously happy. Heh, such a cute girl.

…Wait, now I'm getting embarrassed… I won't be able to look her in the face!

Meanwhile, Kaho-chan was busy playing games with Ajisai-san's little brothers.

"Alright! I won't lose~!"

While Ajisai-san helped me with makeup, Kaho-chan kept her brothers distracted. Well, it's probably not easy to win them over—but good luck.

They already see me as the cool older sister who's good at games. At least, I've earned that role.

"Umm… okay then…"

Ajisai-san's pale fingers trembled like a puppy's tail as she picked up a small bottle.

"Let's start with the base. We'll brighten things up a bit to match the outfit Mai-chan picked, focus a little more on your eyes, and balance everything out."

"Okay!"

Just as I nodded with a big smile—

"Okay then, could you close your eyes?"

"Yes! …Wait, what?"

Ajisai-san suddenly leaned in close.

Wait… what is happening!?

"Um… I thought I'd do your makeup for you while explaining. Was I wrong?"

Oh—so that's what she meant!? I thought she was going to teach me so I'd do it myself!

"No, no! That's totally fine…!"

There's absolutely nothing wrong with Ajisai-san's intentions. I accepted Ajisai-san's words completely, without even a hint of resistance

"Okay… now close your eyes for me."

"Uh… y-yeah…!"

Nope—this is way too embarrassing!

"Don't peek, okay…?"

This is dangerous! Even with my eyes shut, I can hear her voice right in front of me! Memories of that kiss keep flooding back, again and again!

"Heh heh! I win! Wahaha! You're 8 years too early to beat me!"

"You—!"

"I'll win next round!"

Ahh... I'm really glad we're still in the living room. Thank goodness Kaho-chan and the little brothers are around. If it had just been the two of us alone in her room... I might have lost control.

Ajisai-san's soft hand gently cupped my cheek. She held my face in place and carefully began applying the base makeup.

"Nn… there we go. Are you okay, Rena-chan? It doesn’t hurt, right?"

"Y-Yeah… I’m fine."

"Hehe. Alright~"

I'll be okay. I’ll manage somehow!

Nope, never mind! Doesn’t matter what anyone says—this is just way too much! Being done up by Ajisai-san is too ticklish—I feel like my head’s going to explode!

"Hey! That’s a technique I don’t know! No fair!"

"Heh heh~!"

While the lively game sounds filled the room, I was doing all I could to keep from groaning.
Her voice was so close! She was peering right at me! If I opened my eyes now, I might just turn to stone!

"You kind of look like a little kid right before getting a shot, you know…?"

Guh… was closing my eyes that tight too obvious?

"D-Don’t worry about it, really…"

I mumbled a response. Ajisai-san looked at me, a little concerned.

"Are you really okay? Are you forcing yourself? Is it too ticklish?"

Well… I am holding back quite a bit. Still, I can’t let it look like I hate it!
So I forced a smile with just the corners of my mouth.

"N-Nope, totally fine! Don’t mind me—just go all in! Hehe…"

"Y-Yeah… I'm not used to doing makeup on others either, so if anything bothers you, just say so, okay?"

"Okay!"

I'm the kind of person who's never once been able to answer when asked that classic salon question,
"Is there anything you'd like adjusted?"
Even if you gave me truth serum, I'd still laugh and say, "I'm good!"

As long as I give a proper reply and make them think, 'Oh, she'd speak up if something bothered her,' then staying quiet doesn't really count as lying. After all, people see what they think you mean, not what you actually say.

While I was rationalizing all that, Ajisai-san's fingers gently moved across my eyelids, my lashes, even my lips…
All these delicate spots that no one usually touches in everyday life—she was touching them with such care…!

I mean, there was that time we went to the department store and I had makeup done, but that was different. That lady was a pro. Sure, she was a beautiful woman, and I did get flustered, but that was just business.

Kaho-chan once did my makeup for cosplay, but I was too nervous about the actual cosplay afterward to care about things like how close we were. Plus, Kaho's makeup style was more like—bam!—straight to the point, not really delicate.

But now, the one in front of me is Ajisai-san.
My girlfriend.
The person I kissed.

This is bad. This is intense.
Now that I'm aware of all that, it's even harder to handle.

"Just a little more, okay~?"

"Mmph—kay."

I answered like a ventriloquist, barely moving my lips.
I could feel her soft breath the whole time as I held still—for over twenty minutes.
(Though seriously, didn’t it feel more like five hours?)

Finally, Ajisai-san tapped me on the shoulder.

"It’s done."

I opened my eyes.

"Here, take a look. How is it?"

I peeked into the mirror she gave me and—

"This... is me...!?"

It was a total before-and-after.

Just like I asked—for a more elegant look than a cutesy one—Ajisai-san gave me longer, fluttery lashes, sharp eyeliner, bold red lips, and a perfectly defined nose thanks to the highlight. I looked… like a totally different person.

"It’s amazing! You did such a great job!"

"Ooh, let’s take a look."

Kaho-chan came over, grabbed my chin, and turned my head from side to side. Ugh.

"Looks great! A-chan, you’ve got such amazing taste!"

"Aww, it’s just ‘cause your base is already so pretty~"

Ajisai-san giggled shyly. She’s way too cute. And her natural features are insanely good.

"Let me take a few pictures just in case," she said, snapping shots from every angle—just like they do at salons.

It reminded me of when I get new equipment in a game and spin the 3D model around to admire the details. I knew I looked different, but I had no idea how much better I actually looked...

Still, if Ajisai-san says it’s good, then it must really be good.

Anyway—I made it through Ajisai-san’s full-on makeup session!

"Alright then, this is what I’ll go with on the day!"

I said it with a cheerful smile.

But—

"Nope. Not yet."

"Huh!?"

Ajisai-san tightened her lips and quickly grabbed a makeup remover wipe.

"We still need to try a few more styles. You asked me, remember?"

"I mean, I think it’s perfect already!"

"Nope."

She shook her head firmly. Her eyes were completely serious.

"I haven’t brought out all of your potential yet, Rena-chan."

"Ajisai-san!?"

What’s gotten into her!? That sounded like a line from a mecha anime or something—that’s not like her at all!

"I’m gonna do my best, Rena-chan. I swear—I’ll make you the most beautiful girl in the world! I really will!"

She clenched her fist. A strong sense of responsibility burned in her eyes...

"...P-please..."
I had no choice but to force those words out!

As I was getting my makeup done, I could hear Kaho-chan laughing and playing games with little brothers. Not that I was jealous or anything! Nope—not one bit!

I had my armor. I had my shield.

Now, it was time for accessories.

In RPG terms, accessories boost your stats or give you special skills.
So, what’s the most important skill I needed right now?

Confidence.

Sure, looking good helps. It makes people think I’m confident.
But to truly fake being an extrovert, I needed something deeper: that kind of baseless, inner confidence that just radiates from within.

But you can’t change your personality overnight...
Unless you cheat!

"Which brings me to you, Kaho-chan!"

I pressed my hands together and bowed.

We were in Kaho-chan’s room—just the two of us this time.

"Make me another hypnosis audio, please!"

"Nyaruhodo (I see)... So that’s your plan, huh..."

Kaho-chan, sitting across from me, nodded as if she completely understood.

"So that’s why it’s just the two of us."

"Well, I can’t exactly say 'hypnosis audio' out loud when others are around…"

"You could, but Aa-chan might seriously worry about you."

"Then I definitely don’t want that!"

"You never know—Aa-chan might even make one for you."

"Ajisai-san's… ASMR…?"

I imagined it—Ajisai-san whispering in my ear, "I love you, Rena-chan…" Like a "Rena-chan Pet Pampering Edition," where I'm her beloved pet and she pampers me nonstop…

My head spun.

That's way too lewd!!

I shouted without thinking,
"I'd rather be with Kaho-chan!"

Kaho-chan gave an exaggerated shrug and said,
"Well, I guess I have no choice, nya~"

It was the kind of dramatic gesture that wouldn't suit anyone but an actual beauty—
but Kaho-chan is an actual beauty, so it suited her perfectly.

"Hmm, I don't know…"
Kaho-chan folded her arms and tilted her head.

Huh? What's going on!?

"Why are you hesitating all of a sudden!? This is an official request—I'll even pay you!"

"Nah, it's fine. I'll do it for free."

"For free!? That's even more suspicious! What are you trying to make me do!?"

Kaho-chan’s eyes slowly scanned me from head to toe.

Eep! I reflexively covered my chest.

"A-Are you planning another photoshoot…?"

Since the Makuhari Cosplay Summit, Kaho-chan hadn’t invited me to do any more cosplay. Sure, hanging out with her had been fun—but the photoshoots felt like work. And when something feels like work, I get too stiff. I can’t honestly say I enjoy it.

But… if it’s a request from Kaho-chan—someone I owe so much—I can’t just ignore it.

If she invites me again… I’ll have to try. At least enough to look like I’m enjoying myself.

But then, as if reading my mind, Kaho-chan said,
"I don’t really plan to ask you to do cosplay. I mean, if you bring it up and say you want to, then that’s a different story."

I clenched my teeth hard and groaned.
"Ugh... I do want to…"

"Not like in that sneaky 'If you want to~ I guess~ teehee' way though!"

That was… a legit correction. I guess she really wasn’t playing around.

"Uh…?"

"I mean, you just suddenly got flooded with girlfriends lately, right? Your brain’s been totally full."

What do you mean flooded!? It’s just two!!
...Okay yeah, two is still pretty weird!!

"So I figured I'd stop asking you about cosplay for a while. I want you to enjoy it without pressure, you know?"

"Oh… thanks for being so considerate…"

"Heh heh. I'm the extrovert who's nice to introverts~"

She posed with a backwards peace sign under her chin.

She might be joking, but she's not wrong. I am an introvert—and Kaho-chan's a certified extrovert.

"Besides, lately I feel like I've gotten a bit more popular. Before, I used to worry I couldn't draw anyone in unless I was with someone. But seeing so many people support me made me feel like... maybe that's not true."

"Ooh..."

Kaho-chan's self-confidence was rising.
I was so glad. Truly glad she was learning to value herself.

"...What's with that look?"

"Ah—sorry, I just got kind of emotional."

"Rena-chin, you really are such a softie, nya~"

She muttered in a tone of mock annoyance. But even that coldness was so cute... I just wanted to hug her.

"Also, I still don't buy that you used to be an introvert, you know?"

"Ugh..."

Faced with Kaho-chan's flat stare, I resigned myself to the fact that judgment day had come.

"Well, the truth is..."

"Aaa—!"

Kaho-chan suddenly shouted, making me jump.
Still seated, she stretched out and fell straight backward.

"You saw through my fake extrovert act right away, but Rena-chin kept secrets from me all this time! This friendship feels totally one-sided!"

"Auu auu auu..."

"You were the only one trying to look cool! I remembered everything, but Amaori-san completely forgot about me. I thought we were close again like before, but maybe it was just me all along! I'm seriously shocked!"

Still lying on her back, Kaho-chan thrashed around like a sulky child.

Uuuu..... I get it. Realizing someone you thought was a sunshine extrovert was actually just like you—it would feel like betrayal...

"I-I'm sorry..."

I bowed and apologized profusely.

"Koyanagi-san is completely right. I really have no excuse."

"Nope."

"Ah…"

It's over. Is this really the end of my friendship with Kaho-chan...?

"Explain yourself."

"Huh!?"

Kaho-chan suddenly sat up and fixed me with a weirdly intense stare. Then, she held out her hand.

"Go on—your excuse. Give it to me."

"Umm..."

She gave me a direct order—I had no right to refuse.

Wrapped in guilt, I opened my mouth hesitantly.

"I... went through a rough time in middle school, so I stopped going to school for a while. I wanted to leave that version of myself behind, so I decided to completely reinvent myself in high school..."

Kaho-chan stared silently at me.

"Back then, everyone in the Quintet I met was shining so brightly, and I really admired all of you... of course, that includes you too, Kaho-chan. When I found out you were working hard—wearing contacts and pretending to be an extrovert—I thought that was amazing too..."

"Even though you bullied me in the bath."

"I seriously have no excuse for that!"

I bowed so low my forehead nearly touched the floor.

Good thing she didn't ask me to explain that one too—if I'd said, "I just wanted to get revenge for being one-upped all the time!", it would've totally made things worse...

"So… basically, when I saw how hard everyone else was trying, I started feeling like, 'What am I even doing?' I couldn't bring myself to say

anything… I guess I didn’t want to show the lame side of me and get rejected."

"...Yeah."

Kaho-chan crossed her arms and gave a small nod.
But I wasn’t sure what kind of “understand” she meant.

"I mean… I never planned on showing this whole fake extrovert thing either, not unless I totally messed up."

She pouted slightly.

"When you talked about your past, MaiMai and the others didn’t ask anything, right?"

"That’s probably because they already knew I used to be an introvert. Like, ‘Why bring that up now? It’s obvious just by looking,’ kind of feeling..."

That’s what Satsuki-san said too when I told her.

But Kaho-chan shook her head.

"No, I think it was more like... you didn’t seem like you wanted to talk about it, so they didn’t want to push you."

"You think so…?"

"Yeah. Honestly, I know I should’ve done that too..."

Kaho-chan furrowed her brows and seemed like she wanted to say something, but then shut her mouth.

"...Well, anyway! It's fine! I’m totally okay now!"

"Huh…?"

I suddenly felt left behind, like the trial ended and everyone left the courtroom without a verdict.

"B-but—"

"It’s fine! From here on, it’s just my personal feelings!"

"Uh… what?"

I didn’t really get it, but… hasn’t this whole thing been about personal feelings from the start?

That’s why I felt like, if Kaho-chan was still feeling unsure, maybe it’d be better to talk it out until she felt settled…
But if she’s saying “I’m fine” and I keep pushing it, that would just be self-satisfaction on my part...

Still, just backing off didn’t feel right either—so I opened my mouth.

"Umm… well… if there’s ever anything bothering you, just say it, okay? Because… I really do think of you as an important friend, Kaho-chan."

I tried my best to let her know how I felt.

"Because I like you, Kaho-chan... I don’t want you to ever feel even a little upset when you're with me. If there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it. Really."

"....."

Kaho-chan stayed quiet for a moment, then suddenly flailed her arms.

“Ah—!”

“W-what was that!?”

“It’s nothing,”
she replied flatly, suddenly going emotionless.

What was that!? That was definitely not “nothing”!

If her plan was to mess with me and make me anxious to blow off some steam, then… as my punishment, I’ll accept it.

“Then! Rena-chin!”
She suddenly pointed at me. I froze up.

“Y-yes?”

“You’re going to answer three of my questions. And you have to tell the truth! If you do that, I’ll forgive everything! Got it!?”

Three questions...

I blinked a few times. But really, I have no more secrets from Kaho-chan. She’s probably figured everything out by now. If this is her way of wrapping things up cleanly, then honestly, I’m grateful.

"Okay, I understand," I nodded seriously.

Kaho-chan looked serious too.

"Here’s the first one."

"Yes?"

"Rena-chin, have you had sex with Maimai or A-chan yet?"

Excuse me!? That’s way too personal!!

"I haven’t!! I haven’t, okay!? What’s your point!?"

As I probably turned bright red and yelled, Kaho-chan nodded with a "Hmm."

"Looks like you’ll answer honestly. Two more to go."

She acted like she just tested if I’d tell the truth… but did it have to be that question!? Koyanagi Kaho-san…!?

"Alright, let me grant your request—I'll make you a hypnosis audio to boost your confidence."

"Hm?"
I looked up at her like I was bracing for a forehead flick.

"What about the other questions? That was only the first one—you're done already?"

"I'm saving the other two."

"You can do that!?"

"I never said when I’d ask them~"

"Well... I guess that’s fine."

Since I was the one asking for a favor, I had no right to complain.

Kaho-chan grinned like she’d just fully recharged.

"When Rena-chin wins the lottery, I’ll totally ask for her bank PIN!"

"If it comes to that, I’m not sure our friendship would survive!"

"Hehe~☆"

"You're cute, but that’s not the point!"

There's no way that kind of excuse should work.
Just being cute is enough to shut me up. Cuteness really is unfair.

"So, back to the hypnosis audio..."

"Yeah…"

"Let’s say you’re, like, ridiculously easy to hypnotize, Rena-chin."

"Right."

Well, it’s not true, but since we’re just speaking hypothetically, I’ll let it slide.

"I think you’ve only got one more hypnosis left in you for the rest of your life."

"…What!?"

It felt like I’d just received a final warning out of nowhere.

"Of course—you build up resistance the more you do it. You can’t use the same kind of hypnosis over and over. You already did that confidence-boosting hypnosis before, remember?"

"But you’ve been hypnotizing yourself all this time, right?"

"Mine’s been reinforced through conditioning, but even that would stop working if I didn’t keep it up. Besides, it’s been a while since your last one, right?"

"In other words…"

"It’s not going to work that easily.."

No way…

"So you're saying I can't keep depending on Kaho-chan-sama every time I face a life crisis…?"

"Obviously not! I’m not Rena-chin’s personal Pokémon trainer!"

"Tch…"

I grit my teeth. My whole life plan…!

Kaho-chan asked again, as if to confirm.

"So like, are you sure? That’s what I’m asking."

"Huh? About what?"

"That one last important use in your life—are you really okay using it now?"

"Hmm…"

I see… so that’s what this means.

Actually, that hypnosis audio from the last shoot worked so well—like, squirmingly well whenever I remember it—and now I won’t ever be able to use it again in my life…

I paused for a moment, then nodded slightly.

"Yeah, it’s fine."

"Ohhh?"

"I’m okay."

"I know I can’t keep going on like this forever either."

As I kept speaking, the last of my lingering doubts started to melt away.

"I might’ve gone overboard this time because it was for my sister... but someday, I want to become someone who doesn’t need to rely on you or the others. Someone who can like herself, accept herself, and do anything... someday, probably."

I added something a little extra and gave a firm nod this time.

"So I’m okay."

Kaho-chan gave a gentle smile at my words.

"Roger that. For your little sister, huh?"

"Huh? Yeah."

For a split second, I thought Kaho-chan looked lonely—but by the time I blinked, that look had already vanished.

Kaho-chan gave me a big smile and a thumbs-up.

"Then, as ordered, I’ll turn Rena-chin into the ultimate pretty and invincible woman! So you better get ready!"

"I’ll be in your care!"

I bowed deeply to the ever-reliable Kaho-chan.

And just like that, I acquired the accessory.

The hypnosis audio Kaho-chan sent me soon after was an over-an-hour-long masterpiece, and thinking that it might be the last hypnosis I'd ever experience made me feel kind of sentimental.

Well, putting the effect aside, I was free to listen to it for fun... Not that I was going to! I mean, I wouldn't! I was just saying it was an option, okay!?

Armor, shield, accessory—I now had all three.

The last weapon... was Satsuki-san.

Once again, I needed everyone's help… but now everything was ready.

At last, I was heading into the dungeon known as the school reunion.

Just you wait, Demon King!

***

And then, the day of the reunion arrived.

Inside the reserved Italian restaurant, I stood—equipped with the strongest armor Mai had picked, the strongest shield Ajisai-san had trained me to use, and the strongest accessory blessed by Kaho-chan's power.

I'd come here to change the gloomy past I left behind.

I pulled out the trendy brand-name wallet (borrowed from Mai) and paid the participation fee.

I walked through the murmuring crowd of students and sat confidently at the most visible table by the counter, like I belonged there.

It felt like standing in the danger zone of everyone's eyes—like raising your hand to speak during a school assembly.

But right now, I wasn't afraid of anything. Not while I had the strongest gear equipped.

Sure, I stood out—but not in a bad way. Like Mai commanding attention on a city street, or Satsuki flipping pages in a library corner—I owned the atmosphere.

So this is a good kind of standing out... Yes, definitely a good kind!

Whew, I nearly lost my nerve for a second. Even if I had the best equipment—it's still just me inside!

Ugh, I can hear it... everyone's inner voices...
"Huh, is that Amaori?"
"Whoa, what's with that outfit? Doesn't suit her at all…"
"Who even invited her?"
"Lol."
"She's totally delusional, lol."

Aaaaaaaah!! I can't hear this! That's just in my head!

Right now, I'm a Super Lady! I never had a "high school debut glow-up" because I've always been top-tier since middle school! That's how I stand here today—to overwrite my past!

While I kept hyping myself up over and over in my head, I stood with a look that said, "Huh? So this is the place? Hmm, not bad."

I wasn't sticking out—I was standing tall.

While I was battling with my inner anxiety, a girl who had been my classmate in middle school (I don't remember her name!) nervously came up to me.

"Um… did your vibe change or something, Amaori-san?"

Got her!

Wearing the confident smile of a true extrovert, I answered brightly.

"Hmm? Not sure~ But high school's been super fun lately. I'm really enjoying it every day~☆"

"Oh, really? Haha…"

After her, a few other groups came over and started talking to me.

"Wait—she looked so cute I didn't even realize it was Amaori!"

"I seriously didn't even recognize you at first!"

I smiled and nodded while being surrounded by a group of guys and girls. More and more people gathered around me, forming a circle. It's a feeling I'd just recently experienced. Just like during the sports festival, when our class came together around the Quintet.

That comforting feeling—like everyone's listening to what I have to say.

"Oh, this? Yeah, a friend of mine who's a model picked it out for me☆ (⅛ not a lie). She's got amazing taste—and we even made plans to go shopping at Shibuya Hikarie☆ (⅛ okay, that part's a lie...)"

I piled on the sparkly "my life is amazing~☆" kind of bragging—the very kind of normie flexing I usually hate.

I couldn't say it out loud—she'd kill me—but the whole persona I was putting on was totally based on Youko-chan. I know Youko-chan's not the braggy type, but her shoujo manga heroine-style speech just screams "popular girl!"

"Oh, sorry~☆ Since we're all here, I want to talk to as many people as I can today. Let's catch up later, okay?"

Just as I was about to be dragged into afterparty plans, I smoothly slipped away—careful not to stammer or let my act slip.

The best part of this persona is that I don't have to constantly gauge people's reactions when I talk. All I need to do is leave a strong impression, so I go from one vaguely familiar classmate to the next.

Smiles, small talk, perfume, presence—I scatter them all as I walk by.
I'm repainting my dull, gray youth in vibrant new colors.

I wave at a group of girls gathered in the corner and go join them. Even someone like me had classmates who'd talk to her—like Hirano-san and Hasegawa-san. But the looks I got now—dressed in my strongest gear—were wary. It seemed I wasn't one of them anymore.

I chose this path myself, but… it still felt a little lonely. A part of me wanted someone to say, "I was a total introvert too!" and relate.

But I can't let myself falter now.

"Oh, that reminds me☆ Has anyone seen Nashiji-san?"

When I said that name, the girls froze.

"Um… I don't think I've seen her yet today…?"

"Y-yeah, maybe over there or something…"

The girl points at a lively corner

I gave a bright smile and thanked her.

"Thanks☆"

As I walked away, I checked the time. I had set my class reunion time limit to 20 minutes. Kaho-chan said any longer than that, and the disguise wouldn't hold up. Besides, I'd probably run out of my memorized topics.

It would've been great if I could just improvise fun talk based on the mood. But that takes people skills, and I don't have that kind of charisma...

But everyone from our entire middle school grade came to this reunion. There were over 100 in the grade—so even with half showing up, that's nearly 50 people!

If I chatted for even a minute with each of them, that's a full hour!

Maybe that 20-minute rule was way too optimistic!?

Crap, I'm starting to panic—if I do, I'll mess up!

Like Cinderella guarding her glass slipper, I moved calmly, smoothly, and confidently through the venue.

"Hey, have you seen Nashiji-san?"

"Eh? Oh, maybe not..."

"I see. Thanks☆"

I smiled and moved on.

"Maybe Nashiji-san didn't come after all?"

"Ah, sorry. Not sure. I'll ask around a bit, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks☆" I smiled and moved on.

Something feels off.

Back in middle school, Nashiji-san was absolutely the queen—at the top of the social ladder. People like her would never miss a reunion.

After all, she can walk in and rule the room like she owns it. I feel a knot of anxiety tightening around my waist. She probably thinks nothing can start unless she's there—like it's just obvious.

She has to be on top, doesn't she?

That's why she couldn't stand anyone who dared to defy her. She targeted me—just because she didn't like me, for no real reason.

But still… why?

I even showed up 30 minutes late, just in case she did too. I was going to show up at the peak, hit Nashiji-san with a bombshell, and walk right out. No good. I can't find her. My anxiety keeps growing.

I can't breathe. The more I panic, the more my "ultimate armor" feels like it's breaking apart.

This is bad.

I decided to step outside the restaurant for a bit. At this rate, I'm getting nowhere. What I really wanted was to confront Nashiji-san here and clear up the rumors. That would've been perfect.

That way, the rumors about me being an introvert in middle school could've been cleared up through Minato-san.
If Minato-san admitted it was all fake, even the chaos around Haruna would finally calm down.

But if Nashiji-san didn’t show up, there’s really nothing I can do.
I’ll just focus on leaving a strong impression and make my exit.

If I stick around and the mask slips, they’ll realize I’m still the same girl I was back then. While still getting approached by guys and girls, I made my way to the restaurant exit.

I’m almost out of breath—my mental tank is nearly empty.

But I can already see the shore. I just have to reach out and grab it.

"A–maori–"

Someone’s arm wrapped around my shoulder.
I turned to look. It was a tall girl with light-colored hair.

But it wasn’t Nashiji-san.
She was always around Nashiji-san, and to be honest, I used to think of her as just one of her followers.

That same girl who once laughed and said,
"She got rejected? Lame."

I froze up.

"Whoa, what’s this? Amaori, you look amazing now! Remember me? We were in the same class——"

I couldn’t catch the rest.
Maybe it was the noise. Maybe it was the ringing in my ears.

"Yeah, of course☆ How’ve you been? It’s wild—just a year apart, and now everyone’s suddenly so grown-up☆"

Talk to her like we’re equals.
Stand tall. Don’t look away.

She probably doesn’t even remember me. That’s why I have to rewrite everything with who I am now.

"Yeah, seriously. I mean, OO planning a reunion just a year later? So annoying. I heard she had a one-sided crush on someone, but then she got a boyfriend right after starting high school. So lame, lol."

"Ah, so that was the reason☆ Well, whatever. I’m just happy to see my middle school friends again. And OO-san showed up too, even after all that complaining."

"Totally. They should’ve served alcohol or something—juice just doesn’t set the vibe."

"Haha, no way. There’s no hiding it with this many people☆"

I can’t breathe.

As I kept the energy going with her, this spot became the social hotspot. One after another, girls from Nashiji-san’s old group started gathering. Strangely enough, it was just like the time I got invited out—only this time, Nashiji-san wasn’t here.

"Hey, wanna go out after this?"

"....."

My armor started to crack.

"Sounds good," said one of the girls behind me.

"The boys’ll be there too—let’s make it big."

My shield crumbles away.

I was almost at the exit, but those last few steps felt so far.

She turned to me with a smile.

"Amaori, come on—hang out with us a little."

Apparently, I've earned the respect of the popular girls.

This time, they really saw me as one of them.

If I ran away here without caring how it looked—like I did that day I fled to the rooftop—I'd be able to protect myself.

The glow of my accesories is fading.

But my goal is...

Lifting my head—unlike that day—I faced forward with a serious expression.

"I am..."

Everyone's eyes feel like daggers.
I no longer have my strongest gear.
I have nothing left.

No.

I'm Amaori Renako.
I'm standing right here.
I came here to change my past.

"I'm not going. Like I'd ever go with you."

The shift in my tone cracks the air around me.
I gulped in a breath and blurted it all out.

"I wouldn’t have any fun with you guys, so no. I’m not going. Who wants to be with people who just bully and mock others? If that’s what you enjoy, go ahead and hang out together. I’m out."

With every word I said, the tension grew—almost comically so.
Still, I stood there all alone.

"Ignoring someone over something like that? It's just so dumb. Really, really dumb."

I’ve learned now—this world is full of malice.
And if I know that, then I can face it too.
Because I refuse to lose.

For the people who stood behind me.
And for me—the one who believes in herself.

I’m not who I was back then.

Someone laughed.
"Getting turned down? Lame."

She glared at me like I’d just ruined her whole world.
"Don’t get full of yourself. You’re just Amaori—"

I thought she was going to lunge at me.
But even then—I didn’t look away.
I stared back.

"—"

And in that very moment, the restaurant door opened.

Cling clang—the bell chimed.
Heads turned.

A tall figure entered.
Slender and poised—like a model.
Sharp eyes, black mask.
An edgy vibe, like a knife.
They stood over 175 cm tall.
With both hands in the hoodie's pockets, they walked straight toward me.

"Amaori."

Their low, clear voice cut through the noise of the restaurant.

"What are you doing? It's time. Let's go."

"You…"

But Nashiji-san's follower's voice was drowned out by the commotion.
Gasps and squeals followed—
"Her boyfriend!?" "Whoa!" "He's so hot!"

"Ah, but—"

The moment I even looked unsure, they grabbed my wrist.

"Come on."

No room for protest.
They pulled me forward, and I fell into their chest—

Kyaa!
The room erupted with excited squeals.

"Um…"

I whispered just loud enough for them to hear.

Then—

They lowered their mask.

“Eh—”

They leaned over me.
My vision went dark.

Screams exploded from the crowd.

When they lifted their face, I was left blushing to my ears.

I turned back to my old classmates with a sheepish smile and waved weakly.

“Ahaha… S-So yeah, I’ll be heading out first! See you!”

Nashiji-san’s group was left speechless—
Their eyes full of envy, and just a bit of jealousy.
They couldn’t move a muscle.

A little while after we left the restaurant—

“W-Wait!”

I shouted in protest, not even caring that my makeup might smudge, vigorously scrubbing my lips with the back of my hand.

"Thank you for coming to help! But wasn’t all that a bit too much!?"

"What?"

She looked at me with bored eyes.

"If we’re doing this, we go all in. Just like you asked, right?"

"Still—kissing me was a bit overboard!"

"I didn’t touch your lips."

"Y-Yeah, but still!!"

So the kiss that grazed my lips and landed on my cheek was intentional after all.

She glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, then pulled off the hood she’d been wearing low over her face—and even removed the wig.

“…Whew.”

Her long black hair burst free like a blooming flower and fell gracefully down, swaying slightly in the wind. Not a single hair out of place.

She—Koto Satsuki—had returned to her usual stunning self.

My ultimate gear. My sword… was her.

"You totally panicked during your first kiss, face beet red and everything… but look at you now, Satsuki-san. What a wicked woman you’ve become."

"Yeah. Maybe it’s because the worst role model is right beside me."

I wonder who she meant… Mai? Or Kaho-chan maybe?
I was starting to feel like I was on the losing end, so I changed the topic.

"Still… I wasn’t worried, but wow, it really suited you, Satsuki-san."

"I know, right?"

What confidence… She treats compliments like they’re just taxes paid by her loyal subjects…

"Should I have been more modest?"

Smiling under the moonlight as she said that, Satsuki-san looked just like a goddess.

Ugh… she’s way too powerful…!

I had asked Satsuki-san to come pick me up wearing various crossdressing accessories that Kaho-chan provided—like 10 cm platform shoes and a tube top to flatten her chest.

Ajisai-san’s vibe was too gentle, Mai’s face might get recognized, and Kaho-chan didn’t have the height or presence.
So the honor went to our Satsuki-san.

It’s humiliating to admit, but the one thing people envy most at this age… is whether or not you’ve got a hot partner.
And Koto Satsuki’s face? It could cut down anything. That’s why she’s my ultimate weapon.

Honestly, I didn’t care if people thought Satsuki-san was a guy or a girl.
But since Satsuki-sama said, "I’d rather wear a disguise," I went along with it.

Her beauty transcends gender—Satsuki-sama races through the heavens like a divine being.
Hoping I could share even a sliver of her beauty secrets, I asked:

"…What’s your secret to looking so good, Satsuki-san?"

"It’s genetic."

"You’re gonna get punched for that!?"

Actually, I want the world to punch her.
Wait no, what am I thinking!? She saved me! That’s not okay!

Begone, jealous demon in my heart!!

I mean… the person who ends up as Satsuki-san's lover gets to experience that kind of super brag session every day, right? That's insane.
In another world, countries would've been at war over her. She's basically Cleopatra.

"But still, you didn't really need me to save you, did you?"

"Huh?"

"That was a pretty good speech."

Apparently the hypnosis voice effect had worn off, because just now I remembered what I said—and my face turned pale.

"Y-y-you heard that!?"

"More or less."

I'm stunned… I'm seriously stunned!!

"Then come help me sooner, will you!? I seriously thought I was going to die!"

Satsuki-san gave a soft chuckle.

"If you can say something like that in a moment like that…"
She brushed her hair back and narrowed her eyes slightly.

"You can be part of our group now, Amaori."

This time, I was truly left speechless.

"……Wait, I wasn't already part of the group!?"

I shouted, my voice trembling.

Wait… does that mean Satsuki-san and I still weren’t best friends yet…!?

Some time passed. And by the time the shock of finally being recognized as a full Quintet member—seven months after April—had started to settle in…

While walking back toward the carriage, Satsuki-san turned to me and asked,
"So? How’d it go?"

"Um… I think it was mostly a success. I think I managed to shake off the gloomy image."

Satsuki-san’s (almost) kiss must’ve made a big splash too.

"Well, with that much glam, of course you did."
Satsuki-san looked me over, taking in my outfit.

"You’ve really transformed, haven’t you?"

"Well, I had help from everyone… Wait, are you actually praising me right now, Satsuki-san?"

When I hungrily sought more praise, she gave me a smug look.

"Yes. As expected from Mai, Sena, and Kaho."

"Right?! Totally! They all did such professional work—"

I knew she wouldn't just praise me directly! Still, I was happy the Quintet got recognized, so I smiled and tried to keep the conversation going.

"Ugh…"

Suddenly, Satsuki-san twisted her face like a demon splashed with holy water.

"W-What is it!?"

"No… even if it was to drag you down, I really shouldn’t have said ‘as expected from Mai’ so casually…"

"Right, you’re cursed to lose years off your life when you praise people. That must be hard…"

When I tried to sympathize, she simply brushed her hair back.

"Anyway—"

Her ability to switch moods that fast is honestly enviable. Not that I’m sure I’d want to be like that…
"So that means the mission's done now, right?"

"Uh…"

I stopped walking. Under the streetlight, Satsuki-san turned around to look at me.

"What’s wrong?"

"Actually… I’ve only finished half, I guess…"

I glanced down at my phone. Everyone who helped with the plan was messaging me things like, "How did it go?" I replied, "Yeah, it went well."

"But the truth is, I was supposed to meet someone named Nashiji-san. But she didn’t show up at the reunion."

"Hmm."

Satsuki-san gave a disinterested hum.

"Is that the person who made you stop going to school?"

"Yeah, kind of… Wait, what!?"

I flinched back in surprise.

"W-Why do you know that!?"

Satsuki-san should've only known two things about me: that I had a 'high school debut' and that I was kinda truant in middle school… So how!?

However, Satsuki-san replied calmly, like someone who had just solved a hard puzzle in seconds.

"I just connected the dots. Don't worry, I haven't told anyone else."

"Th-thank you… I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Admitting I became a truant because of someone is already hard enough... but actually talking about it is even harder.
(It's not like I'm hiding anything from you, Kaho-chan!)

It's just… I don't want the blame to fall on the wrong person. I never wanted to take revenge using the power of Mai or Kaho-chan anyway…

Satsuki-san suddenly looked up at an angle and murmured, as if asking the moon.

"Nashiji? Ah, so that's what it was."

"Huh? You know her?"

"Nope. Not at all."

…What?

Tonight, more than ever, I had no idea what Satsuki-san was thinking.

"Well then, we'll just have to meet her."

"I mean, I do want to, but…"

For example, should I ask Seira-san to get in touch with Nashiji Minato again and find out which school she goes to… or something?

If I tried to lie in wait and catch her… then I wouldn't be able to rely on my fake persona anymore. I'd be stuck fighting in enemy territory, totally at a disadvantage. Maybe I should just go back to the reunion and at least try to get her contact info. I really don't want to… but that still feels like it might lead to something.

"Just wait a second," Satsuki-san said, pulling out her phone.

She turned her back to me and started making a call.
Looks like someone picked up.

"Hey, you," she said to the person on the other end.

"It's about Nashiji Komachi. You're investigating her, aren't you?"

"Eh!?" I accidentally blurted out.
Who the heck is she calling!?

Satsuki-san gave me a little "shh" gesture. Ugh… I can't interrupt her…
But I'm dying to know…!

"You're just trying to get some dirt on her, right? I don't care what happened. What we need right now is the info. Yeah. You can submit whatever you need to your higher-ups later."

Judging from the bits of Satsuki-san's conversation I could hear… she was definitely asking for something outrageous.

I-is that really okay…?

After some arguing, Satsuki-san finally nodded, like she had come to a decision.

"Alright then. Let's call it settled. I'm counting on you."

She ended the call.
As she stared at her phone for a while, I nervously asked,

"Um… what just happened?"

Suddenly, a message popped up on my phone. It was from Satsuki-san.
It had the one thing I needed—Nashiji Komachi's address.

"Eh!?"
W-what is going on!?

I looked at her in shock, but Satsuki-san turned her back to me, as if to say her job was done.

"Well then, this is as far as I go."

"Um, uh…"

"The rest is up to you. Do your best."

There were so many things I wanted to say… but I couldn't even begin to get them out. I hurried after Satsuki-san as she quickly walked away.

"W-wait a sec! This is…"

Then I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window.

Thanks to Mai, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan, I had become the best version of me—completely transformed. I looked like a different person, and that gave me courage.

It reminded me—no, proved to me—that I have friends who care about me this much.

Even if I lose all my armor, my shield, my accessories—even my sword—
I still carry the strength called friendship in my heart.
What can someone like me even do?

That's easy.

I can do anything.
Because this is for my little sister.

"Satsuki-san!"
My voice, like a cry, echoed down the dark street.

She stopped walking, but didn't turn around.
I waved my hand high in the air.

"Thank you! I'll do my best!"

Without looking back, Satsuki-san quietly raised her hand.

I broke into a run. Like Cinderella without her glass slipper.
But I'm still here.
I'm still me.
At last—it's time for the final battle.

*** ***

On her way home, Koto Satsuki suddenly remembered something and made a call.

It connected right away.

“Helloo… Haaai…”
came the voice on the other end, sounding sulky.

Without wasting time, Satsuki opened with an apology.

“I’m sorry.”

There was a pause. The other person seemed surprised.

“So… what’s with this sudden change of heart?”

“Nothing big. I knew I was asking a lot. I just thought I should at least thank you. So—thanks.”

“Haaah…”
The other person—Terusawa Youko—replied, clearly not thrilled.

“I mean… what exactly are you trying to do? Our job is to split up that Queen Rose young lady and Amaori Renako, right? Though honestly, I feel like 90% of what I do now is housework… And don’t you think we’ve strayed a bit too far?”

Satsuki didn’t reply right away.

“You said you had your own goal and all… but seriously, I really can’t help but feel like I’m being used here.”

As she approached the station, she kept walking beneath the neon lights, tuning out the voices coming from the crowd.

“It was necessary—up to this point.”

“…Was that really necessary?”

“Yes. She can’t handle two things at once, so to move forward, the problems surrounding Amaori—aside from romance—need to be resolved first."

“…So that’s your strategy to split them up?”

“That’s right.”

Satsuki declared it, without the slightest hesitation.

“You always say things so convincingly… If I were a detective, you’d be the con artist.”

“Don’t say nonsense. I’m hanging up.”

“Ah, wait—when you’ve got time again, help us out too, okay!? The princess won’t listen unless you say it! You still owe us for that intel!”

Beep.

Her reflection caught her eye.

A woman with long, black hair.

Not the kind fairy who gave Cinderella a pumpkin carriage—
but more like the witch who handed Snow White a poisoned apple.

(That’s right. Just like before—unless Amaori’s in perfect shape, it’s pointless. Just get over that stupid trauma already.)

The wind blew, and her hair swayed.

(Is love really something so amazing… or just something pointless in the end? Am I the one who’s wrong? Or is it Mai?)

The witch in the display case gave a faint smile.

(You’re the one who’ll uncover the answer, Amaori—)

A Tale of Amaori Haruna Part 5

My big sister Renako had always been smart and capable. Maybe it was because we were two years apart in age, but little me couldn't understand any of that—I just looked up to her with innocent admiration.

She knew all sorts of games, and most of the fun around me started with her ideas. But more than anything, she was always kind to me. Whenever we got in trouble together, she'd step up first and take the blame.

Even though she sometimes made a face like,
"Why am I the only one getting scolded?"
if I looked downhearted, she'd just smile and say:
"Because I'm your big sister."

Each time she said that,
a quiet sense of pride grew inside me.

Because I'm my big sister's little sister.

So I started facing my problems sincerely—learning to work hard every day. Even if I couldn't do it well, I didn't want to be the kind of person who made excuses without trying.

Because I'm the little sister of someone truly amazing.

But even with all that noble determination, things didn't always go her way. In fact, most of the time, everything went wrong. In her early elementary school days, Haruna was constantly frustrated, and every time, her sense of justice would explode.

She scolded a classmate for littering—and they talked back, and it turned into a fight. She reported a boy who didn't clean to the teacher—and got called a tattletale.

She ignored a classmate’s chore and left it undone—and the classmate cried the next day, making her the villain.

So she hit them, too.

Nothing ever went smoothly.
She just wasn’t as clever as her sister.
Still, she kept fighting with her immature sense of justice—
until, little by little, her heart began to wear down.

Maybe she could never be the proud little sister of someone so amazing.

One day, after school, at the park—
as they sat side by side on the swings,
Haruna looked up at her sister and asked,

"How can I become someone that people don’t hate?"

Just asking that question might’ve disappointed her.
Nervous, Haruna looked up to check her sister’s expression.
But her sister answered, like it was the most natural thing in the world:

"I love you, Haruna. Even if everyone else hates you, I’ll still love you."

That sweet, grown-up smile…
It made Haruna’s chest feel warm.

"I see…"
Just with those few words,
She thought:
"Then, I guess it’s fine."

Even if the entire class hated her—
as long as her sister loved her, that would be enough.

From that day on, the armor Haruna had worn disappeared.

There was no need to fight anymore.
She just had to live her life properly.
And if anyone picked a fight, she'd strike back.
Even if people talked behind her back, it didn't bother her anymore.

She might never become the perfect little sister of her amazing big sister.

But if I could just become the beloved little sister of the big sister I loved so much—

Eventually, for some reason, things began to change for the better. More and more people started to like Haruna for who she was. They said she was easier to talk to. Even Haruna herself began to feel like she could finally breathe.

That's when Haruna's self-esteem was fully formed. From then on, she never struggled with who she was again. The story of Amaori Haruna, the little sister of Amaori Renako, came to a happy ending.

But—
only if we're talking about Haruna's happiness.

At some point, things began to reverse between Haruna and Renako.

The big sister she loved so much stopped going to school. She collapsed, like mud. She lost her inner strength and crumbled to the point where she couldn't stand on her own.

Like a seesaw—if one rises, the other sinks.
Maybe that's just how it is between sisters.

The more Haruna's talents blossomed, the more they tormented her big sister.

The big sister she once adored began to ignore her.

"Liar."
You said you loved me… and yet.

There was never anyone who would love her for a lifetime.
It had been Haruna's misunderstanding from the very beginning.

Still… maybe deep down, she always believed. That one day, her big sister would stand up and try to walk again on her own.

Because… she’s my big sister.

She’s my one and only big sister.

Chapter 8 — There's no way I could be an older sister, that's impossible! (it wasn't impossible!?)

I followed the address and found the house in a quiet corner of a residential neighborhood. Born and raised in this town, I'm the kind of girl who can get anywhere as long as I have the address.

But here's where the real challenge begins.

The house looked ordinary, but the big nameplate reading "Nashiji" glared back at me like some kind of anti-evil charm. Even though I got all the way here on momentum, now I can't bring myself to ring the doorbell! I'm probably the kind of person who couldn't even hit the fire alarm in an emergency—because it's scary!

Seriously, door-to-door salespeople are heroes. Walking into random homes? That's legendary.

How do I ring the doorbell...?

Wait! What if I call Seira-san?! If it's her, they probably won't be suspicious and open the door!

Genius!

…Nope. Still blocked. Sorry, Seira-san... Once this is all over, I'll definitely keep my promise with Mai, I swear...

That leaves only one option—I have to ring it myself. Man, if I knew it'd be this bad, I should've at least brought a gift box or something. Though honestly, that'd probably just make them ask, "What the heck is this for?"

Uoooooh! O gods of courage, hear me!

Please lend me your strength—HYAAH!!

I did it! I rang the bell!
I actually pressed it!

Suddenly, something yanked my arm hard—
“Let’s get out of here!” a voice screamed.
But that voice... was just my cowardice.

No!
If I run now, it’ll just be a doorbell prank!
I don’t want to be a criminal!

Clinging to the moment like it was a splinter of a boat in a raging sea, I stayed still.
Time crawled by, unbearably...

And then—I heard a voice from the intercom.
“Yes.”

That voice… probably Minato-san!

I waved at the camera and smiled awkwardly, like, “Eheh... hi.”

Was that the right way to react?

"Um, hi. I’m Amaori Renako."

"...Huh? Why?"

Of course, it was a very natural question.

“Um, actually… there’s something I wanted to talk about…”

“Uh… please wait a sec.”

A moment later, the front door opened.

Minato-san appeared in her loungewear, looking clearly suspicious.

“Um, Onee-san… why are you here at my house…?”

“W-Well, because we used to be classmates!”

“…I see?”

She furrowed her brow and touched her chin—definitely not convinced. That’s fine! I don’t need her to believe me right now anyway!

I stood there at the entrance, talking with Minato-san.

“Actually, I had a middle school reunion today.”

Her face seemed to stiffen slightly when I said that.

“That’s why I’m dressed like this.”

“Yeah, yeah! So I suddenly remembered you, and I thought, ‘I wonder how Nashiji-san’s doing!’”

I could feel her suspicion rise to the next level.

“You came here to see her?”

“W-Well, I didn’t make an appointment or anything, but… if she’s home…”

I gave Minato-san my best smile—what little was left of my extrovert energy—and pressed my palms together in a polite plea.

“So, what do you think? Sorry for showing up out of nowhere!”

As expected, her reaction wasn’t great.

“Well, but…”

Ugh! I’m terrible at turning people down and at insisting when someone turns me down!

But I can’t just avoid everything I’m bad at forever!

“C-Could you maybe just ask Nashiji-san for me? Like, just say, ‘Amaori Renako came by!’ or something?”

I just kept pleading, wholeheartedly.

It was a big gamble… but if she’s the Nashiji-san I remember, she wouldn’t turn me away at the door.

She’s selfish, sadistic, and totally self-centered—but to keep up her “popular girl” act, she has to be social.
If she lets that crack, she can’t stay on top of the class hierarchy.

Minato-san hesitated for a second… but then nodded slightly.

“Thank you so much! Um, I’ll just wait here, then!”

Alright! From here on, I just have to stay polite and not upset her. Gotta bow low, real humble-like. So much for pretending to be a cheerful extrovert—I’ve totally dropped the act.
…Oh well. Minato-san probably saw through it anyway.

She started to leave, but then paused, looked down, and shook her head.

“Actually… I think I’m going to pass.”

“Eh!?”

Wait—she changed her mind!?

Why!? What did I do!?

“Please just go home for today, onee-san. Something about this just… doesn’t feel right.”

“But! I mean—this is for Haruna too!”

I was already playing my final card.

It was Seira-san and Minato-san who asked me to help fix Haruna’s situation, right?
So it doesn’t really make sense for Minato-san to back out now… or at least I thought it didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Minato-san said, bowing her head slightly, a sad look on her face.

That makes no sense!?

If this were an RPG, I’d just beat Minato-san who's blocking my path, save right before the final boss, and go confront Nashiji-san—but this is Japan! If I did that, I’d be slapped with a bunch of criminal charges. There’s nothing I can do...

Game over!? My mind went totally blank—Amaori Renako was frozen.

No, it’s not over! I can still do this! I can fix this! A brilliant solution is about to pop into my head—I can do it, I can do it… I…

Just when even my baseless confidence was about to run dry…

“Minato!”

I turned around. A miracle…!?

Actually, yes. It really was. Because the one who appeared was Seira-

san—one of the middle school trio.

Huh!?

While we both stood there stunned, Seira-san stepped between us.

“W-Why are you even here?”

“…I got a message.”

From who…?

The only people who knew I came here… were the mysterious informant—and Satsuki-san.

Wait, no. There was someone else… Moon-san!

She’s my cosplay buddy and a mercenary—of course she traded contact info with Seira-san. She must’ve seen this coming and sent help ahead of time. She’s always ten steps ahead…

Seira didn’t come at me—she turned straight to Minato.

"How long are you gonna keep acting so stubborn!? You know this has gone way too far already!"

"Whoa, what’s with you all of a sudden, Seira?"

"It’s because of you that the three of us still haven’t gone back to normal!"

Then Seira lunged at Minato—wait, what!?

Whoa, this got violent out of nowhere! A fight!? Is this a fight!?

W-What do I even do!? Should I try to stop them!?

"Senpai! Go up the stairs—room on the right!"

"Huh…?"

Seira shouted—

"Go! Hurry!"

Wait—but that'd definitely count as a crime!
This is still Minato-san's house, and even if Seira-san gave permission, it'd still be trespassing!

"Ugh! Just deal with all this already!"
Seira shouted through gritted teeth, pressing Minato against the wall.

I glanced at Minato-san's face for a moment.

Her eyes—

—I bolted between them, nearly tripping as I kicked off my shoes.

"...Sorry, Minato-san! I'm coming in!"

"Hey—wait, what are you—"

"I'll apologize later!"

I ran up the stairs of a stranger's house.
I'm fifteen and now officially a criminal!
No more toy handcuffs—real ones are coming next!

But Minato-san's eyes, just now...
I think—those were the eyes of someone hoping to be saved. Like she knew no one would help her, but deep down, she was still waiting for someone to reach out a hand.

Those eyes…
They were just like the ones I saw in the mirror, back when I went to school and no one would talk to me. I don't know if I can help.

But even so—
I have to go.

There's something waiting in that room.
Something Minato-san's been hiding… something she's been trying to deal with alone.

I reached the top of the stairs.
Just to the right—the door.

I grabbed the knob.
And this time, without hesitation, I opened it wide.

Inside—
It was a room where time had stopped.

My breath caught.
Wrapped in silence, like the bottom of the ocean.
A darkness where no light could reach.

The figure that turned toward me was huddled under a blanket, like she was freezing from the cold.

…Huh?

Our eyes met.
No way…

I felt like I was trying to talk to some alien being, and I called out.

“…Nashiji-san?”

I stepped one foot into the room.

She seemed to realize it was me.

“…You… Amaori?”

That voice—there was no mistaking it. It was Nashiji Komachi.

And yet, she looked nothing like the image of her that was burned into my memory. It felt like I was staring at two entirely different people who just happened to come from the same origin.

She looked fragile, as if she had been beaten down by the very world around her, on the verge of fading away.

…What is this?

The room was a mess.
And in one corner, her school uniform lay crumpled and tossed aside, like garbage.

Her uniform…?

And in that moment, everything became clear.

"...You haven’t been going to school?"

Nashiji-san didn’t answer.

I stepped further into the room.

It was such a mess, there wasn’t even room to stand.
Old textbooks, seemingly untouched, were scattered everywhere—faded like dead coral.

"...Why?"

The words fell from my mouth like stones hitting the floor.

"...Why?"

Nashiji-san turned her eyes away, like even moving her gaze was too much effort.

"This has nothing to do with you..."

No. I couldn’t let that slide.

"...Nothing to do with me?"

My vision flushed red.
My world narrowed to a single point.

"Of course it has something to do with me!"

It was a voice I didn’t even know I had in me.

Because let’s be honest—“This has nothing to do with you” is the last thing Nashiji-san should say.
That’s the one thing that denies everything I went through.

"The one who half-jokingly excluded me was you, right?"

I came all this way with a reason. But I forgot all of that, and just threw my emotions at her.

"You have no idea how much it hurt! You don’t get to say it doesn’t matter!"

She looked at me with dull, glaring eyes—and even that made me furious.

"You pushed me so far, so why are you the one holed up like this!?"

But the feeling boiling in my chest—it wasn’t anger.

"If you’re going to end up like this, then what was the point of me suffering with that trauma all this time!? Doesn’t that just make me look like a fool!?"

For some reason… it just hurt.

"Hey, Nashiji Komachi!"

"Shut up!"

Nashiji-san stood up and leaned in toward me.

"You just show up out of nowhere, say whatever you want! What’s your problem!? You’re so annoying! I don’t care about you, Amaori!"

"Stop running away and just go to school already!"

Her face twisted in pain.

"You don’t even know what’s going on!"

"Of course I don’t know! This is the first time we’ve met since starting high school!"

This wasn’t a conversation. It was just a fight—an exchange of bullets loaded with raw emotion.

"What...? Did you come here just to get revenge?"

"No. I’m not like that. I won’t become like you."

"You dressed like that just to mock me, right?"

"No. This outfit... It’s proof of everything I’ve worked for."

I aimed my words like a bullet that could reach even the deepest depths.

"Look at me. I worked hard."

I aim the gun at her—ready to shoot down the Amaori Renako that Nashiji-san knows.

"I made my high school debut. I left behind who I used to be."

If she wanted to stay hidden in the dark, that was fine. I would show her just how brightly I could shine now.

"I made so many friends! I practiced makeup all the time! I even got a lovers! I worked hard to take back everything I lost from shutting myself away!"

My words hit her. I saw her look down in pain.

"I worked so hard… and I just wanted to say—‘Serves you right!’
How’s that!? Serves you right!"

"....."

I hurt her—deliberately. With malice.
How does it feel, being looked down on by the girl you once bullied?

But… I didn’t feel better at all. Not even a little.

"Say something already!"

Even though I knew… no matter what she said, it wouldn’t satisfy me.
I wasn’t going to let Nashiji Komachi go that easily.

I shoved her.

"Komachi!"

When I shoved her, she didn’t resist at all—like a ghost, her reaction was eerily light. She stumbled, tripped over the bed, and dropped onto its edge like a lifeless doll.
Then, after a long silence, she finally groaned:

"…..I was wrong."

"....."

And then slowly, painfully, she began to speak.

"It was just teasing… just making fun of the quiet ones."

"It was a trend in our class. We’d invite the kids without friends, make them hang out with boys, and laugh at them."

"It was just a stupid game to us."

Back then, everything in the class moved the way Nashiji Komachi wanted. If someone annoyed her, she’d ignore them—make them a warning to everyone else.

Like a child ripping the wings off a butterfly.
There was nothing in Komachi's confession.
Everything she said—exactly what I imagined. Predictable. Cliché.

If there had been even one new truth, one unexpected reason, one honest excuse... maybe I could've forgiven her.
I think… that's what I really wanted.

Because honestly, I don't want to hate anyone.
Even if someone's hurt me, I don't want to strike back.
That kind of thing… it's exhausting.
And more than that, it hurts. It hurts both sides.
I'm so weak, I even hurt from the hurt I cause.

It's painful.

"So… I'm sorry."

Even that apology… disgusted me.

If she'd still been acting all high and mighty—If she was still sitting on her throne—I could've just thrown my hatred at her from below and walked away.

Then I could've screamed all my rage, thrown all my hate, hurled every insult and grudge at her.
Got my revenge.
Felt satisfied.
Started fresh.

And yet, seeing her like this…

I'm painfully reminded that, in the end, Nashiji Komachi is just a first-year high school student—just like me.

Her reason for falling apart?
It’s probably something ordinary.
She got into high school, tripped, failed, and when she turned on others, they turned on her just as fast.
That’s how she ended up here—not going to school.

It feels gross.

Like I’m stomping on someone who’s already fallen to the bottom.
Even I think this is just bullying.

"Promise me."

Lowering my smoking gun, I look down at her.
I’m done here.

"Don’t tell anyone about what I was like in middle school."

"…Yeah."

She nods slowly, like a fish that’s lost all strength.

"Okay."

"And one more thing."

I squeeze out the last thing I have to say.

"I’ll forget about you, Komachi."

"...Yeah."

That was the last thing I had to say.

"I won’t ever think about this again."

Because it’s not like my words will ever reach her anyway. Telling her to hang in there, to face forward, to fight back against life—none of that would ever get through.

There are people in this world you just can’t understand.
Komachi lives in the deep sea.
I walk in the sunlight now.

She smirks arrogantly.

"You’re free anyway, right, Amaori? Just hang out for a bit."

"Sorry… I… don’t really want to go…"

That day, in that moment—our paths split forever.
Still…

As I was about to leave, I stopped near the door.

"One more thing."

"...What now?"

Those words were completely unnecessary.

But still, I felt like I saw a faint, fragile thread.

What connected me and Komachi wasn’t any lingering grudge from middle school, or some ongoing conflict. It was just something simple. A feeling anyone would have just by living. Wake up, eat, go through the day. And like that—it was love for her family.

"Try not to worry your little sister too much, okay?"

Not as Amaori Renako and Nashiji Komachi, but simply as one older sister speaking to another.

As a former truant student, those were the only words I could give her.

Komachi didn’t say anything in return. But that one sentence… I think it reached her. Even down to where she was.

When I returned to the entrance, having spent every last bit of emotion—Minato-san and Seira-san were crouched by the door, like teenagers hanging around outside a convenience store.

It looked like their heated argument… had at least come to an end?

"Oh, Onee-san."

Minato-san noticed me and looked at me with worried eyes.

"…How was it?"

Being asked that by her little sister made me feel kind of guilty…

But apologizing now, after everything I said, just felt too convenient.

So I just calmly said what had to be said.

"My business here is done."

"…I see."

I’d done what I came here to do.

Komachi probably won’t ever talk about my past again.
I really had changed it—my past.

Now, maybe… everything will finally go well.

Haa…

Minato-san let out a long sigh.

We were all exhausted.

Seira-san sat cross-legged, her chin in her hand, and muttered:

"Minato, you've been trying to hide that your sister's stopped going to school."

"....."

While Minato-san kept her head down, Seira-san spoke up on her own.

"She just wanted everyone at school to know how great her big sister is. She told them all kinds of stories she'd heard. I think the stuff about you,Onee-san senpai,came up from that too."

"I see…"

Minato-san looked apologetic as she began to speak.

"I just thought… if everyone found out she wasn't going to school, it'd make it even harder for her to come back."

Well… yeah, I guess that makes sense.

"I'm sorry, Onee-san."

"No, it's okay."

I could understand that feeling—wanting to protect someone in your family.

"Being a little sister must be tough, huh?"

When I said that with a faint smile, Minato-san looked up in surprise, then nodded, her face looking like she was about to cry.

"Maybe… maybe you're right. But I love my big sister."

"I see…"

It warmed something deep inside my chest.

That even someone like Komachi, after everything, still had someone on her side. Because even for my past self, that would've been a kind of salvation.

While I gave a gentle smile, Seira-san sighed in an exaggerated way.

"I've been stuck in the middle this whole time, you know?"

"…Sorry, Seira."

"Geez, honestly."

I bowed my head to Seira-san, who had always done everything she could for Haruna and Minato.

"Thank you, Seira-san."

"You don't need to thank me, Onee-san Senpai… Haruna and Minato are my friends too."

With a small grunt, Seira-san stood up.

"I snuck out of housework to come here, so I should be heading back soon. But—there's just one thing I've always wanted to say."

Then, as if to bring this whole conversation to a close, she smiled at Minato.

"You two are way too obsessed with your sisters."

Ah… That made sense.

Seeing Minato turn red and fall completely silent.

Thanks to Seira-san’s words, I finally understood.
Maybe this wasn’t really a story about two sisters—one who used to skip school, and one who still does. Maybe it was actually about the younger sisters who had to live in their shadows.

I waved to the two of them and left the Nashiji house.
My makeup, all melted from sweat, felt gross. I just wanted to take a bath, fast.

As I walked a bit and looked up at the window with its tightly closed curtains, I wondered—just for a moment—if there was something more I wanted to say.

But all that came to mind was a bitter little thought.

I started walking again.

Really... she's just hopeless, that kind of older sister.

***

After getting home, I had some leftover dinner since I hadn’t eaten much at the reunion.Then I took a bath, and finally felt refreshed, head to toe.

"Ah, welcome back."

"Mhm."

I passed Haruna in the hallway. I've known that face for as long as I can remember—
cheeky, a little bratty, strangely mature but still with that innocent look.
And sometimes, it's just unbearably cute and precious.

I called out to her.

"Hey, Haruna."

"Hm?"

I hesitated a little… then tried asking.
"Hey… want to sleep together tonight?"

"Huh?"

"Sis… what is this even about?"

"Uhh… no real reason…"

The lights were off, and I was lying in the same bed as my little sister.
It wasn't a double bed or anything, just narrow enough that I might fall off if I wasn't careful.

"Ughhh. This is so uncomfortable."
As expected, she started complaining.

And yet, when I asked if she wanted to sleep together, she thought about it for a second and said, "I guess I don't mind…"
It was like that with baths and hangouts too—she always comes along when I invite her.
Maybe… she really does like me.

Her warmth came through the pajamas—

Soft and warm.

"So? What is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I figured you had something you wanted to talk about."

"Ah, well… so you noticed?"

"I mean, it was super obvious."

"Yeah, that's true."
I had no choice but to admit it.

"What did you talk to Mai about?"

"Huh, that?"

"Not just that—this too."

"Eh… whatever. There was this dumb rumor going around at school, and I tried to put it out, but it didn't work. So I decided to stop going."

"What the heck…"

"You know the saying, 'Rumors only last 75 days'?"

"Wait… so two months?"

"Pretty much."

"Even i couldn't have expected something like that…"

"Genius, right?"

"Why are you proud of that…?"
Seriously though… does she even get what she's doing?

She actually confessed that the reason she was absent from school for so long was to make people stop thinking I'm an introvert…

"Why would you go that far?"

"Because if people find out you're a gloomy introvert, my school life would be over!"

"Yeah yeah."

"Don't 'yeah yeah' me! That's literally everything!"

"Hey, Haruna."
I whispered while our backs touched.

"It's all okay now."

"What do you mean okay?"

"I mean, it's all fine."

"So... you're saying I need to burn down this house?"

"No, no. My gloomy past has been wiped clean."

"You built a time machine or something?"

"Something like that."

"You're an Idiot."

"You brat..."

My sister held back a yawn.
"You know, I think you should try living like a decent person for once, big sis"

"I mean… I kind of already am, don’t you think?"

"I guess."

"…Wait. Was that you being nice?"

"Yeah… thanks to all your wonderful friends."

"Well, yeah…"
Can’t argue with that.

"Haruna..."

"Hmm?"
Her voice started to tremble a little.

"I’m sorry."

"For what?"

"For everything, all this time."

Little by little, my words came out.

"For skipping school… for being such a mess… for taking it out on you.
And even before all that—for never being a good big sister… I’m sorry."

"…"

"But I’ll try. I’ll do my best to become a proper big sister.
I’m truly grateful for everything you’ve done for me, Haruna. So…"

Haruna stirred slightly. Then suddenly, she yanked on my shoulder and turned me to face her.

"Huh?"

My little sister sat up and leaned her face in close.

"Wait—what?"

Before I could react, she bit me. On the neck.

"Gyaaah!!"

I jumped back in a panic.

"Wh-What are you doing—GYAAAH!"

I rolled off the bed with a loud thud and landed flat on my butt.

"What are you doing, big sis?"
Haruna looked down at me and laughed, sticking her tongue out playfully.

"You worrying about me? You're a hundred years too early for that."
I couldn’t say anything, so I just groaned and rubbed my sore neck and butt.

I mean, okay, maybe she’s right—but come on! She could at least show me her cute side sometimes!

You big dummy, Haruna!

A Tale of Amaori Haruna Part 3

"Please, Haruna-senpai!"
My sister bowed her head desperately.

Haruna stood with her arms crossed, staring down at her older sister, who was still just a middle schooler.

"A high school debut, huh…"

"Yes!"

A voice echoed in her head.

"Liar."
Here we go again.

Of course, she didn't believe it.
Her sister had always let her down.

Even before she stopped going to school, she had been a dull, unremarkable person—bottom of the class social ladder, emotionally clueless, and inconsiderate.

The admiration I felt for her as a child turned out to be a complete misunderstanding. What I thought was reliability was just her being overbearing. What seemed like kindness was really just weakness. And as the years went by, all those illusions slowly fell away.

Now, like a skeleton with no flesh or skin left, her sister bowed her head—
and Haruna just watched.

It would've been easy to walk away right then—to turn my back and listen to the part of me that felt betrayed.

Because when you expect something, you only end up hurt again.
And the hatred just keeps growing.

Yes. Even now, I was still holding on to hope—
that she might shine like she used to.
That my sister might become that amazing person again.

It’s pathetic. I never learn.
But the things I say to her—
they cut me too.
I’m still holding on, just the same.

So…

"Fine, whatever…"

This is it. The last time.
A chance to settle things—with her, and with myself.
And if it fails… at least I’ll have a reason to finally walk away.

"First, we’re going to the salon."

"Huh?"

"Get that annoying hair of yours fixed! Once you can see straight, we’ll move on to the next step! And just so you know, if we’re doing this, we’re going all in! If you start whining halfway, I’m done with you forever! Got it!?"

My sister stood tall and bowed her head deeply.

"Thank you very much, Haruna-senpai!"

It’s not going to work anyway… but that’s okay. If it’s really impossible, then so be it. It’d be better if she just admitted it. Honestly, I’d feel relieved.

"I'll do my best!"
Then she turned on her heels.

"…Hm?"

She was probably just acting on a whim. But there was something in her eyes—A quiet resolve that hadn't been there in years. In the past three years, I'd never seen her like that.

And just like an old scar aching again, I felt a flicker of admiration for her stir in my chest.

She was standing in front of the bathroom mirror. Holding a pair of scissors sideways, Bringing them up to her bangs, Murmuring something like a quiet prayer.

"I'll do this… I can do this."

She stared into the mirror with sharp intensity, as if her own reflection were her greatest enemy.

"……!"

Haruna gasped and quickly ducked out of sight, pressing her hand over her mouth behind the bathroom's thin wall.

She hadn't expected this.
It might've been the biggest miscalculation of her life.
A tear slipped down from her eye.

Haruna remembered—
There was a time when she had been hurt, confused about how to live without being hated, and she had confessed all of it to her sister.

That day, her sister's words had saved her.

Now she realized…
They were the same.
Her sister was also lost, stuck in life,
and yet still struggling—
still trying to change.

Haruna’s heart overflowed with emotion.

"I'm starting over… right here, right now!"

In that moment, Haruna finally understood what her sister was trying to fight. The hardship Haruna had once overcome as a child—it was something that could happen to anyone.

And now, her sister stood at the same crossroads,
finally ready to face life head-on.

(Big sis…)

She couldn't even name the tears welling up inside her.
Her emotions poured out like a broken dam.
Three years of bottled-up feelings caught in her throat.

(Big sis…!)

Her sister would never go back to how she was before.
The beautiful memories of childhood would likely continue to torment her.

But even so, she would change.
No one knew where she'd end up—
but she was still Amaori Renako.

She was still the big sister Haruna had once loved so deeply.

Stifling her sobs, Haruna cried and wished:

If only everything in this world could go her way.
If only her future held no more pain, and everything turned out right.
If only every person in the world could love my older sister.
I hope her high school debut goes smoothly, and that she makes lots of friends.
Someday, she'll fall in love—and may that happiness last forever.
Because for me to be happy... she has to be happy too.
Her happiness is mine.

We’ve always shaped each other, like mirror images.
That’s what it means to be sisters.
I want her to be happy—for me.
She’s my other half.

Haruna took a deep breath,
wiped her tears, and appeared in front of her sister with squared shoulders.

"Big sis!?"

"Huh!?"

Renako had cut her bangs with scissors, and now stood there with an awkward haircut.

"I told you to go to a salon! Why would you cut it yourself!?"

"Uh… you said I couldn’t move on unless I did, so… was that not okay…?"

"I didn’t mean just chopping your bangs off would fix things! I meant go do it properly! Geez…"

Haruna sighed deeply at her anxious sister.
"Guess there’s no choice—next is washing your face and doing some skincare."

"Huh?"

"I’ll book a salon visit for you next time, alright?"

"Y-yes,!"

Haruna groaned at her big sister, who responded like an over-eager rookie soldier.

"Seriously, you’re completely helpless without me."

And so, the first step in a new relationship between the Amaori sisters began here.

Epilogue

Some time later, I got a message from Seira-san. (Naturally, I had unblocked her by then…)

Apparently, Minato-san wanted to get in touch, and Seira asked if she could share my contact info.

I replied, "Of course," and while at it, she reminded me about my promise with Mai again… But in the end, things between me and Seira-san also went back to normal.

She’s my sister’s friend, Kaho-chan’s cosplay buddy, and a fan of Mai.

She’s two years younger than me, but seeing how thoughtful she is toward her friends made me feel closer to her. She’s really a good person.

As for the message from Minato-san—

It said that Komachi Nashiji had returned to school for the first time in six months.

"I’m sorry for the trouble. There’s a lot I want to say to my sister, but I think it’s better not to get involved right now. I feel like it would only burden her if family keeps pushing. But really—thank you."

When it came to that message, though… I just didn’t know how to respond.

I wish I could’ve just said something like, “That’s good to hear,” and left it at that… but I’m not mature enough for that.

In the end, what did I really want her to do?
Did I want her to stay stuck in that frozen room forever?

Or did I want her to return to school and act like the queen again?
Honestly… I don't even know.

People are complicated.
Even now, I'm not sure if I've fully gotten over my trauma from middle school.

Because—even if I've come to terms with what happened with Nashiji-san—I've learned that if I casually reject someone's invitation again, there are people who'll get offended.

Living boldly without caring what others think… that's still not something I can do. So I'll probably keep living while constantly worrying about others' opinions.

But when I heard Nashiji-san went back to school…

I realized something.
Knowing that something I did helped change someone's life—that really is something to be moved by.

And so, the seasons go on.

* * *

The weather was getting chilly enough that I was starting to long for a coat more than a scarf.

When I came home and said, "I'm back," I noticed two unfamiliar pairs of shoes at the door.

Oh? What do we have here…

I crept up the stairs quietly, trying not to make a sound. As soon as I reached the top, I heard cheerful voices coming from Haruna's room.

I leaned in to listen.

"Wait, but that's like… right?"

"Well, if Haruna says so, then..."

"LOL..."

Three voices.

They were already back to normal.

Maybe even if I hadn't done anything, the three of them still would've ended up laughing like this.

But if that's the case, I don't mind.

I only did it for myself—because I wanted to.

Don't get it twisted.

I have no plans to act all annoying and go, "Hey, that was thanks to me, right? lol" to my little sister.

...Though, maybe once in a while wouldn't be so bad. Like if she really tried to act all superior or something... yeah!

Mm–hmm, I nodded with my arms folded, and just as I was about to head back to my room—

Just like before, the door opened. Ugh.

"Oh, it’s Onee-san senpai!"

"Hello! Thanks for having me."

Seira and Minato bowed politely.

"Um… E–excuse me."

Getting caught off guard like this is the worst!

I bowed back, but something about the mood felt strange.

Seira and Minato exchanged awkward glances.

Wait, did they figure me out…? Like they don’t need me anymore? They just greeted me but now don’t know what to say?

I guess as the older one I should say something to break the ice, but I’m way too awkward for that. I don’t even have any small talk ready.

"Well then, enjoy yourselves."

So I just played the role of “Haruna’s sister” and walked away. As long as I stay in character, I can do it. Roles are the best!

But just then, Seira and Minato stopped me, gently tapping my shoulder.

What!?

"Well, Haruna told us just now…"

"You helped out even though you’re going through a tough time…"

"A tough time…?"

What are they talking about? I don’t have a clue. Haruna gave an

awkward laugh, clearly trying to dodge.

I was getting a bad feeling.

"Eh, Wait. Haruna, what did you say?"

"Well, how do I say this…"

"What!?"

When I pressed her, Haruna looked away.

"I figured it was okay now… so I told them you used to date Mai-senpai."

"Ha!?"

My eyes flew open. Even if we're family—there's such a thing as privacy!

That's when I finally understood what those sympathetic looks from Seira and Minato really meant.

"Wait… is that why?"

"It's okay, Onee-san senpai. At least you got to enjoy a nice dream, right?"

"I mean, if you use your past with Mai Otsuka as leverage, it might be easier to get a new partner! So good luck!"

I groaned.

"Listen! I haven't even been dumped yet, okay!?"

As expected, my words didn't reach the middle school trio at all.

"Th-these girls…"

What the heck am I supposed to do in this hellish mood…?

Just then, Haruna gave a small, deliberate cough.

"Then, big sis…"

She cleared her throat again— And with a teasing glint in her eye, she gave me a sparkling smile.

"Should I volunteer to be your girlfriend?"

Maybe even she felt embarrassed teasing me like that—her cheeks were a little red. To my little sister, who just said something that completely ignored the fact I'm her older sister—

I shouted.

"You're a hundred years too early to be worrying about me, little sister!"

Geez… you're seriously the most outrageous little sister ever! Right, Amaori Haruna-chan?

A Tale of Koto Satsuki Part 2

"Why don’t you get it!?"

She slammed the door shut, her cheeks flushed and a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. It was rare to see her like that, so I found myself speaking to her gently without thinking.

"...Are you okay?"

Startled, she looked up at me.

"Satsuki? Why are you here?"

This was Queen Rose HQ. I’d been stopping by for personal reasons lately, but I had no intention of telling Mai the truth.

"Someone almost asked me to model again."

"I see... I think you’d be great at it, though."

"Using your connections now would be rude to people who are working hard on their own."

I didn’t plan on picking a fight with Mai over it—it’s just not worth the hassle.

Satsuki quickly changed the subject.

"Anyway... who was that woman earlier?"

"...Ah."
Mai’s expression darkened.

They moved to the lounge and sat together on the sofa.

Mai spoke, her expression still somber.

"It’s about the fiancé. Mom apparently has no intention of taking back her words."

"I see... she’s not going to be easy."

"Yeah. I admit I was careless... but why is she rushing everything like this?"

Mai looked like she might bury her head in her hands at any second.

It should be around now.

Satsuki continued speaking carefully so as not to tip off Mai.

Mai was keenly perceptive. The expressive talents she honed as one of Japan’s top models often extended to reading others as well.

"Your mom called me in the other day and asked how things were going for you at school."

"...What did you say!?"

"She mostly asked the usual stuff, but one thing stood out—she wanted to know if you’ve started dating someone. I think she’s figured it out."

"Then why...?"

"She probably doesn’t trust your current partner. That’s why she’s trying to set you up with someone she thinks is more suitable."

Mai fell silent.

It’s meddling, sure—but it’s also her mother’s love. That must feel complicated.

"Then why not just introduce her?"

"You think introducing her would fix anything?"

"....."

Mai went silent again.

Good. If she’d been blindly in love with Renako, my plan would’ve fallen apart. Thank you for being such a mess, Renako.

"And there’s Sena, too."

"Yeah… you're right."
Lowering her voice, Mai gave a small nod.

There’s no way anyone would accept a three-way relationship.
But what Mai’s mother misunderstood was that it was actually a case of four-timing.

"But even so, I’m not giving up on Renako. I’ll find a way."

"....."

Seeing that gleam in her eyes, Satsuki made her move.

"So I came up with something."

She kept her tone casual, trying not to sound unnatural.

"I don’t really care what you or Amaori do. But I don’t want Sena, who did nothing wrong, to be caught in the middle. So—"

Looking straight into Mai’s eyes, she said:

"How about pretending we’re dating?"

Mai just looked back at her.

"If we pretend to be dating in public, we can probably push Lucie away. I know aunty better than anyone else—and she trusts me. If I’m your partner, I think she’ll accept it."

She said all this carefully, doing her best not to speak too fast. Her heart was pounding as Mai stared at her intently.

"You two can keep dating in secret. This will just be a public act between you and me. I’m sure aunty will fall for it—"

Suddenly, her hand was grabbed.

"Huh?"

"Are you serious!?"

Mai’s face lit up in a radiant smile.

"Y-yes..."

Slightly overwhelmed, she nodded.

"Thank you for going this far for me! Satsuki, you’re really a kind person!"

She even got hugged.

"U-uh... yeah..."

She didn’t know why, but she felt oddly guilty.

She had expected Mai to doubt her and reluctantly agree—but this?

"Meeting you might be one of the greatest blessings of my life, Satsuki. Thank you. I'm glad you're here."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. It's not like aunt has agreed yet."

"No, no—if it's you, Satsuki, even if I were the President, the whole nation would celebrate. This is perfect!"

"That was too much!"

Panting, she pried Mai off her.

What is with this girl!?

"Just know what you're getting into."

"What do you mean?"

Mai smiled like all her worries had vanished, and that just made Satsuki even more irritated.

"Lucie doesn't seem like the type to give up on you so easily."

"Heh."
Mai even chuckled aloud.

"She'll give us her blessing. If we're together—she's a kind woman, after all."

Ugh, seriously.

Satsuki had to focus all her willpower just to keep her face from showing how annoyed she was.

That’s exactly why!

You!

You’re the type who gets totally blindsided by someone like me!

Instead of yelling, Satsuki held herself back from punching Mai in the gut with all her might. And so, one week later, the name of Mai’s fiancée was officially changed.

Oozuka Mai.

And Koto Satsuki.

What had formed between them wasn’t just a winter wind—it was a hurricane far too big to be ignored.

Afterword

Hello, this is Mikami Teren.
First off, I owe you all an apology...

I said I'd release both parts quickly, and keep the page count short—yup, I wrote that in the volume 6 afterword.
Sorry...

Well... I've just been really busy with all kinds of work… eheh…

This might not make up for it, but I'll try to get volume 8 out a little sooner! I swear I won't make you wait another year this time! Trust me! Please trust me, okay!?

If I lie again, feel free to bury me under a tree!

Alright then! Now that I've totally regained your trust (while definitely not avoiding eye contact), I'll begin the afterword for volume 7.

This time I have so much to say! I've even been given 8 full pages! Wow, I sure talk a lot!
Not that I should be this giddy after making you wait a whole year... right...

1. Volume 7 Recap (No Spoilers)

First of all, this volume is about the Amaori sisters.
Sister yuri is a classic theme in the genre—and I absolutely love it too. So I took this chance to stuff in all the elements I enjoy. The way a sister sees her sibling. The way a sibling sees her sister. That unique closeness only family can share… It's something truly one of a kind.

Sisters are just the best… really…

Since this is a two-part story, we started the chapters from Chapter 5 this time. And for some reason, Renako always ends up in a bath with a cute girl in Chapter 2.

But this time, there was no Chapter 2 to begin with. So before writing, I thought, “Ah, guess no bath scene this time!” But then, based on where the story was headed… yep, she ended up in a bath again with another cute girl. Total coincidence!

Geez, these coincidences keep happening!

A story with this much skin probably wouldn’t make it to anime, huh? Things are strict these days… Also, this volume was a power-up episode for Renako, leading into the Season 2 finale.

That’s one of the reasons we split it into two parts. When the main character levels up, they become able to take on even tougher trials!

And that’s how Renako’s world keeps growing. Hang in there, protagonist!

2. About This Volume’s Cover (No Spoilers)

So yeah, this is Renako’s very first solo cover. We did it!

Technically, it’s not the current version of her, but to represent the story, we had Takeshima-san draw a determined Renako. I really love stories about people who fight to change themselves.

It’s exactly because they’re not strong enough that I want to see them struggle—to push past their limits. I want them to shine. You’re the main character of this story, Amaori Renako.

3. About the Future of the Story

Next time will be the Season 2 finale.

If I try to fit it all in one book, it'll be super long, so I'm still not sure whether it'll come out as Volume 8 by itself—but no worries. The story is already planned out! I know what I'm going to write!

Like the end of Season 1, this one will again bring big changes to the characters' relationships. I'll squeeze out every idea I have to surprise you while meeting your expectations—so I'd be thrilled if you're looking forward to it.

I'll be doing my best too…!

Now then, let's move on to the acknowledgments. Takeshima-sensei, thank you once again for the super cute illustrations of the girls!

And for drawing those adorable reader reaction illustrations again—seriously, you're the best! I seriously can't survive without your art, Takeshima-san! Let's go to the top of the light novel world together…! To my editor K-Hara-san, thank you as always for all your support.

There are more things to coordinate lately, and as usual, I end up making things hectic every day... I really admire how much you value the reader community. I always try to follow your example. Thank you!

To everyone who helped make this book happen—thank you so much.

Huge thanks also to Musshu-sensei, who draws the manga version, and to Henda-san, the editor.

Believe it or not, the manga has now entered the Volume 4 arc! Go ahead and draw Kaho-tya to your heart's content…

Also, please check out my other girl's love comedy, Arioto! As I write this afterword, I'm literally diving into chaos right now.

Hang in there, me… Hang in there…

Next time, the person who's been scheming in the shadows will finally step into the spotlight.

This is the climax of Season 2.

I'll give it my all so I can deliver it in the best form possible!

This was Mikami Teren!

Afterword 2

The afterword's not over yet!

So, I've got an announcement for you all. Watanare is getting an anime adaptation!

Yay!

It's the dream of every light novel author—to have their work adapted into an anime. I never thought I'd make it this far… I'm beyond grateful!

First, please allow me to formally express my gratitude.

There's absolutely no doubt—Watanare becoming an anime is all thanks to you, the readers who supported it.

To those who read it, recommended it to others, or supported it in their own way—thank you. It's thanks to you that we've come this far. Yes, I mean you! You holding this book right now! (I got serious out of nowhere, huh?)

There are all kinds of entertainment in today's world. We're living in a time where even high-quality entertainment can be enjoyed for free. In this era, those who still spend their money and time to buy Watanare, you are deeply appreciated.

To repay you, even a little, I'll continue writing yuri with a flavor that's a little different from the rest. No matter how much entertainment exists, I want people to say, "Still, the nutrients from Watanare can only be found in Watanare." Creating stories that make people feel that way is the greatest way I can repay you.

This is an experience only Watanare can offer—please continue supporting this world! So now I'll be talking about the anime and all the behind-the-scenes stuff!

Woohoo!

1. News of an anime adaptation arrived!

When I looked back at my emails just now, I saw the first one about the anime adaptation was sent on November 28, 2022. That was two years ago!

It started with a phone call. The moment my editor said, “There’s an anime offer for Watanare,” I turned off all emotion and just calmly replied, “I see.”

I still remember that. Because… anime adaptations are scary!

I’m a light novel author celebrating my 10th anniversary this year (I’ve been around for a while, at least in terms of career length).

I’ve heard a lot about anime adaptations from others—yes, including plenty of horror stories... Like getting canceled halfway through—apparently that’s pretty common.

What if I got super excited right now, lived every day hyped up about it… but then the whole anime deal collapsed?

My mental health wouldn’t survive it! I’d be a wreck!

My mental defense instincts kicked in.

Ever since then, I’ve been telling myself every single day for two years, “Not yet—it’s not time to celebrate,” just to protect my heart.

I know, I’m such a pain, right?

2. First Staff Meeting

Some time after the anime project was greenlit, the main staff members were finalized. This meant the director, character designer, series composer, and others—in short, the team that would actually be making the anime had been decided.

This was around the summer of 2023. Six months had already passed since the anime adaptation was confirmed. Apparently, that's about average speed—maybe even a bit fast. Anime adaptations really do take a lot of time, huh?

The introductory meeting was held in a large conference room at Shueisha. I think there were about twenty people there—lots of high-ups from Shueisha and various people involved with the anime.

Ah, I see—it's like a kickoff meeting! That's how I interpreted it. As everyone shared their thoughts about the anime and Watanare, my turn came—right at the end.

Wait, the original author speaks last!?

Even while flustered, I shared one thing I'd decided beforehand about the anime. That was about the core of Watanare.

Watanare is a yuri story. But is yuri really the heart of the series?

It's partly true. But honestly, I felt it would be inefficient to expect people who had never worked on yuri before—people who aren't deep into it—to make one properly.

So I decided: I'd personally supervise the key yuri elements—as a hardcore yuri fan—while letting the production team focus on the other heart of Watanare. In other words, "Let's emphasize how wonderful

hardworking girls are!”

The earnest efforts of girls resonate with everyone. I felt this was a perfect theme for anime, a medium that helps reach a wider audience.

But back then, I didn’t know yet…

I had no idea that Arakawa Yasuhisa—the man behind Kamen Rider BLACK, Kuuga, and Super Sentai—was a hardcore yuri fan who buys Yuri Hime every month, and even volunteered to write all the episodes himself!

And so, with the staff finalized, we moved on to the next stage: the script meetings—also known as the “read-through” sessions.

3. The Script Reading Days

From then on, I came to Shueisha every week to join the script reading sessions in the meeting room. Since Mr. Arakawa totally got all things yuri, working with him was super easy and smooth.

The script readings started around autumn and went on until the beginning of 2024, I think. I really enjoyed those days, but wow—script reading takes up a ton of time! I realized, “Wow, anime adaptations really do get hectic!”

I’d heard during my ten years as a writer that the author has a lot of say during script readings. So I tried my best to clearly explain my reasoning, and I always organized my thoughts beforehand when I wanted changes.

Because you know—saying something like “This just feels kinda off, y’know?” actually works when you're the author! (Probably! I mean, I don’t actually know, but still!)

That’s terrifying! I don’t want to use my authority to make anyone

miserable! No monster author here!

So whenever I voiced my thoughts, I always asked things like, “This is what I think, but what about you, Director? Everyone?”—checking with the team.

Even so, I think I was treated very kindly—maybe even spoiled a little.

But given the kind of story Watanare is, I think the script readings were always full of laughter—it was such a fun atmosphere!

This is a total side note, but I found it really funny that even at the script readings, all the adults respectfully called Ajisai and Satsuki “Ajisai-san” and “Satsuki-san.”
(Meanwhile, Renako was just “Renako.”)

4: Summary

I begged for 2 extra pages in the afterword, and yet I didn’t even get to write about the voice recording…

I said it’d be 8 pages, but now it’s 10! See!?

There’s still so much I want to say—maybe I’ll write it on Fanbox or X (formerly Twitter), or in the afterword of Volume 8.

Even now, everyone working on the project is giving it their all to bring out everything that makes Watanare special. In fact, including the director, the team is made up of people who are crazy about Watanare!

About four different staff members told me, “Renako is totally me!”
Like, seriously—what kind of person is Renako!?

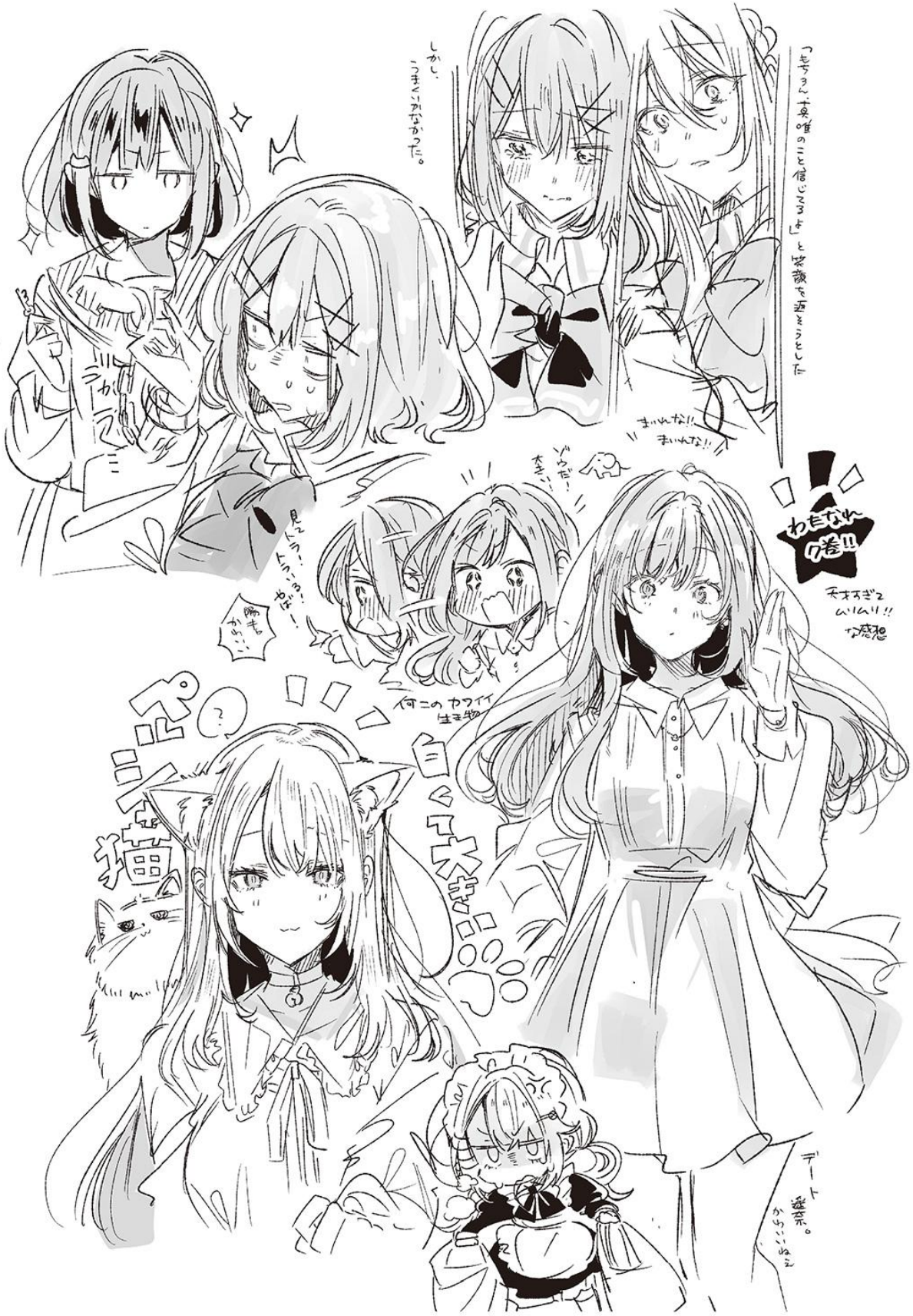
Even I’ve started to think… maybe it’s finally okay to be happy about it. So, just a little over half a year left—let’s live each day looking forward to

the broadcast together!

I'd love to get that story—the one about breaking down a girl who swears girls can't be with girls—turned into an anime too!
(Yeah, no way that's happening though.)

Well then!
I'm just glad I could finally share this happy news today!

This was Mikami Teren!


「きすさん、真雅のこと信じてるよ」と秘蔵を渡そうとした
しかし、つまらなかった。
まいんな!! まいんな!!
ゾウだ! 大きい!
見て! ムラ、ムラ、ムラ、ムラ
やば!
何この カワイイ 生き物
白く「大きい」
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天才すぎる いいんり!! なぬ想
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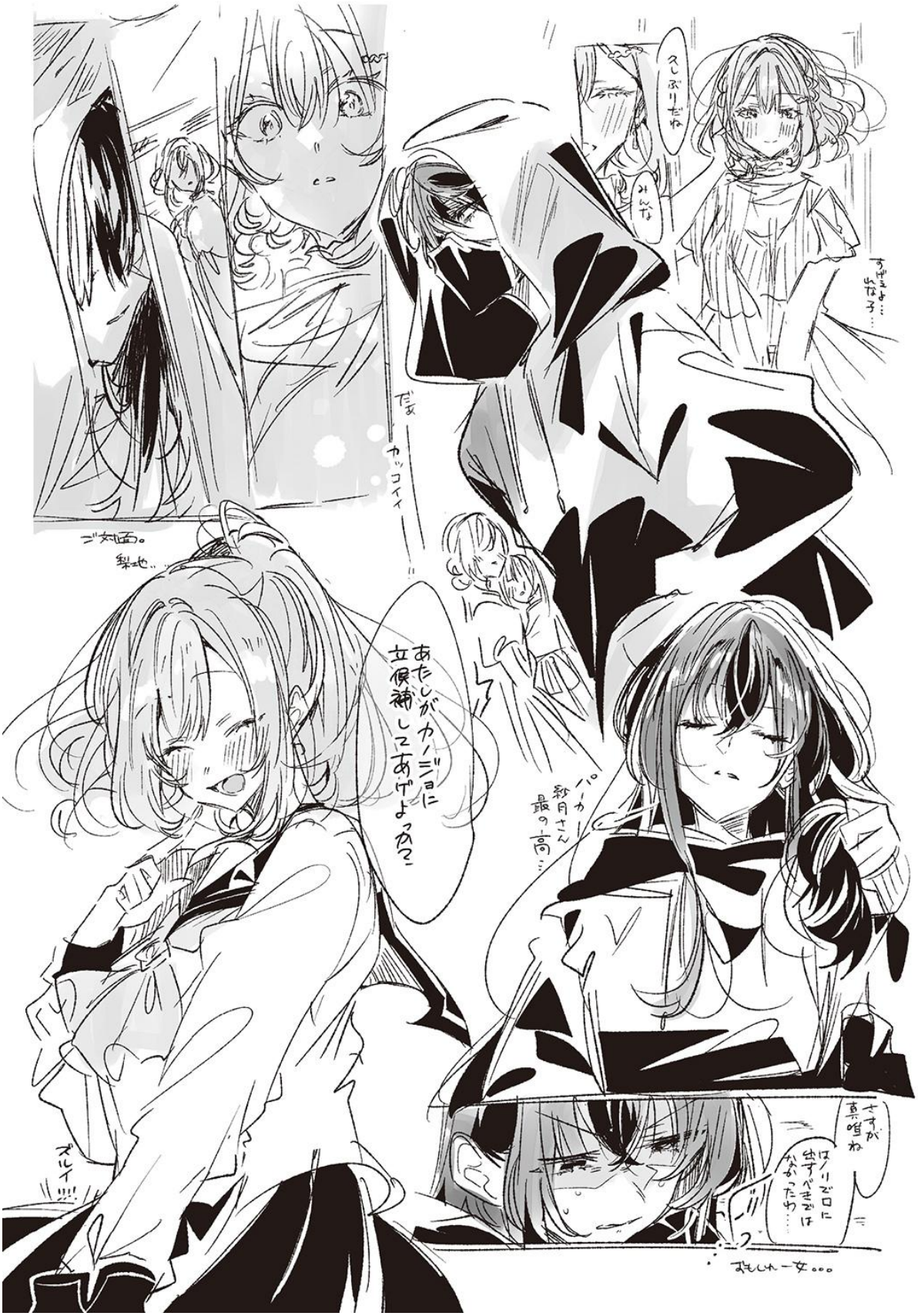
ひさしぶりだね
みんな
すげぇよ…なんか…
だよ
カッコイイ
ご対面。
梨々也…
あたしがカノジョに立候補してあげようか？
パーカー紗月さん最の高…
ズルイ!!!!
さすが真唯ね
ほぼノリゼロに出すべきぎはなかったわ……
おもしれー女…

TVアニメ化も決定!!
コミックスでも
青春ガールズラブコメ!!
コミックス
①〜⑦巻
大好評
発売中!
漫画 むっしゅ
原作 みかみてれん
キャラクター原案 竹嶋えく
わたしが恋人にムリムリ!
なれるわけないじゃん
(恋ムリじゃなかった!?)
ニコニコ漫画にて大好評連載中!